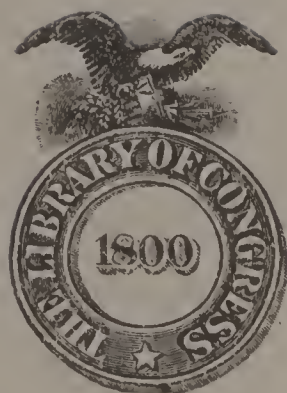


The HOUSE of BROKEN DREAMS

CHRISTINE
JOPE-SLADE





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THE HOUSE OF
BROKEN DREAMS

CHRISTINE JOPE-SLADE

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BY

CHRISTINE JOPE-SLADE

NEW  YORK

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THE HOUSE OF BROKEN
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Chapter I

I

LONDON wrapped helplessly in a great gold wave of August sunshine, bleaching the very shadows that would have stemmed its molten onrush, so that they lay fragile as lace across the pavement under the railings of the Temple Gardens and again in a wavering grey line where the parapet divided the sequined glitter of the river from the hard glare of the road.

Two young men, hot and tired and irritable, stopped for a second in the shadow of one of the plane trees. It had a deceptive gossamer quality that afforded no real respite from the hectic sun, but the short, sturdy young man unscrewed his aching blue eyes sufficiently to twinkle up at his companion.

"You're a prig, Angus, a prig wallowing in his priggishness. You make me tired!"

"It's my duty, Bobbie. Once you've seen your duty. . . ."

"Damn it! you're married to it."

The tall young man laughed. His hair, his face,

his eyes were brown. A young evening breeze fluting adventurously in the leaves above his head, shifted them, and the yellow sunlight came through and varnished his brownness.

"Look here, Bobbie, what's the use of getting rattled?"

"I hate to see a good man go wrong. Look here . . . think of it! Paris! Italy! Spain! Egypt! . . . and you're going to stay here and turn yourself into a blinking crèche! Is it fair on me?"

"Is it fair on them to go?"

"Apparently they're busy praying you will."

"It was all right while their father was alive. One supposes he kept this rag-tag and bobtail in order, but to go abroad and leave those two girls to cope with them and that boy to run wild. It's unthinkable."

"You *want* to interfere, Angus. Why not look things straight in the face? Other people's troubles are often much more exciting than your own happiness. You're going to enjoy it."

"They've got my back up," Angus Reid owned curtly.

"Ah! now we get it! They've got your back up!" Robert de Bouton grinned. "All right, Angus, but for God's sake be honest with yourself about motives, that's all. Priggishness isn't a virtue, it's a state of personal preservation. I'm telling you you've never lived. I want you to live. All your life you've been doing your duty by someone. It's become a bad habit. It's growing on you."

Angus Reid laughed. He linked his arm in his friend's.

"Good old puffing Bobbie," he said easily. "We never see alike in anything. Barton will be gone if we don't buck up."

II

The lawyer received them gravely.

They were hot from climbing his dusty, sun-spangled stairs; his room was narrow, dim, unbelievably cool. It was like entering water. It suited him. Entrenched behind his huge desk he was not unlike some watchful, wily old carp; faded, a little bleached and slumberous, with ugly outstanding ears on either side of his narrow head, like gills.

He said:

"It is hot to-day, quite a record heat. The *Evening News* says we have broken the record for ten years. Remarkable! I suppose you have come to see me about the O'Rane trusteeship? Do you propose to accept it, Mr. Reid?"

Angus Reid said he did.

"Admirable," said the lawyer.

"Damnable!" exploded Robert de Bouton.

The lawyer looked at him. It was as if something had darted past him in the water, neither interesting nor frightening, but faintly disturbing. It was as if he waited for the ripples to subside before he said: "It is only fair to tell you they are incensed at the idea of a guardian and trustee. I understand they will resist the slightest interference. Briefly, I gather they are already in a state of siege."

"From whom?"

"From Miss Fannie O'Rane. She was here this morning. She was extremely excited. The whole position is most awkward. I pointed out that it was a difficult position for a young man of twenty-six to be suddenly left sole guardian and trustee to a family. She seemed to derive amusement from the idea, considerable amusement."

"Is she pretty?" broke in Robert de Bouton.

"I do not know that it matters at this juncture."

"Or any juncture," added Angus Reid curtly.

The lawyer put his arms on the desk. Robert crossed his leg and a gleam of sun crept through the shades and settled on the toe of his shoe. It set a silver butterfly shimmering in the cloudiness of the high ceiling. Until the lawyer spoke it seemed the only live thing in a dead and dank world. He said very slowly:

"Mr. Reid, I WENT THERE."

The room came suddenly to life, Robert de Bouton's toe became so still that the butterfly poised above them.

"Well?" said Angus Reid.

The lawyer shrugged. "Unbelievable!" he said. "Simply unbelievable!"

"In what way?"

"An almshouse for down-at-heels ragamuffins, neither more nor less. I was appalled. Impossible people, dangerous people. I met a curate and his wife there. I said something of the sort to him. He was furious. I told him it was idealism gone mad. He said the Bible was full of that; they're *those* sort of people."

"They must have money to run a place like that. Suppose I stop their allowance?"

"I should not counsel anything rash, Mr. Reid."

"Of what does the household consist?"

The lawyer put his thumbs and little fingers slowly together, widened his hands to a trellis, fitted it slowly over his nose and mouth and spoke through it.

"Miss Fannie O'Rane, twenty-three; Kane O'Rane—she is twenty. July O'Rane, twelve and a half; and Patrick O'Rane, fifteen."

"And the rest?"

"I met an old violinist, a penniless painter, a clown past work, a poet, and I believe there are other pensioners."

"They shall be cleared out."

"Steady, Mr. Reid, steady now! They are prepared for you to take that particular point of view and action . . . they are prepared."

"In what way?"

"They have put their heads together. An alteration in the present arrangement suits none of them."

"I presume I can enforce authority?"

"Legally, yes."

"The police . . ." broke in Robert de Bouton.

"Miss Fannie mentioned that this morning," said the lawyer. "Publicity would be most undesirable, embarrassing. The whole thing makes a romantic story, the sort of story the Press loves to get hold of. It would be difficult for Mr. Reid. It appears that Miss Fannie and this old poet have written it up in anticipation. I must say as she read it to me it seemed full of points, not without wit, considerable wit. I should put the police and the attendant publicity out of my mind definitely. I should really, Mr. Reid."

"Did Miss O'Rane ask any questions about me?"

"She appeared entirely uninterested."

"If I were you, Angus, I should let them go to the devil their own way."

Angus Reid looked at his friend. Mr. Barton looked at Angus Reid, then he appeared to slumber behind his cage of latticed fingers. Angus explained to Robert de Bouton.

"Harry O'Rane and my father were pals at school, then at Oxford. Then Mr. O'Rane married a street harpist and Peter married mother, and then . . ."

The lawyer smiled thinly behind the mask of his interlaced fingers. Robert de Bouton said: "Quite."

Angus said suddenly:

"I shall write to Miss O'Rane and ask her if she will put me up while I am in town. Where is their house?"

"In Soho, Mr. Reid. One of those quiet, old-fashioned houses in a quiet square, very pleasant. Not many of them left now. You go through a street full of cheap restaurants, and suddenly you come to it. Delightful. I was charmed. You have quite decided to accept the trusteeship?"

"Mr. O'Rane's letter made it difficult to refuse."

"It is a question of sentiment."

"I see it as a duty. What education have these young people had?"

"I should say they have accumulated a tremendous amount of general knowledge."

"I wish you'd ask them to put me up too, Angus?"

Angus Reid rose and held out his hand.

"I'll come to-morrow and go through Mr. O'Rane's

papers with you. It seems to me the first thing to do is to gain admittance to the house and see how things lie."

"They wouldn't mind putting me up," interrupted Robert de Bouton eagerly. "It seems a sort of hotel."

They went down the sun-flecked stairs side by side. In the Temple the shadows had spread, the light had mellowed, the Thames ran between her grey banks like a gilt ribbon, the scribble of roofs was sharp against the fading sky.

"It would be a lark to change places," said Robert de Bouton. "They don't know either of us. Now that's an idea."

Angus Reid said with a faint, pleased smile: "It's going to be difficult, very difficult. I'd like to talk to Marjorie about it."

"Hampstead?" I don't think I'll come, Angus.

"Why not?"

"Too bracing," answered Robert de Bouton vaguely.

III

As the taxi hurried through the jostling carnival of the Strand, swirled past the square frown of St. Martins-in-the-Fields and darted up the Charing Cross Road, Angus Reid felt solidly, comfortably mature. He was about to legislate and administrate. It was in the execution of these offices that he had hitherto most clearly realized himself. He was able to stand back and watch himself at work, and admire the neatness and surety with which his tidy, logical, compartmented mind functioned. The conditions of his life had made

this attitude almost subconscious: a widowed mother with property, voluble ineffectual spinster aunts with incomes derived from the same source, a crowd of advice-claiming, timid elderly friends of his mother's. These had fostered that consciousness of living more vitally, more solidly, when he was coping with affairs. He liked to be surrounded by them, chirping like sparrows, advising, suggesting, explaining, and let his mind dart away with the untidy mess and muddle of their problems, sort it all out like a neat housemaid, and, while they still fumbled and quibbled, pass it back, sorted, solved, arranged. It gave him a satisfying, almost thrilling, feeling of reality, so that he moved among these dependent, rootless minds like a real person among shadows. It was the only expression of power open to him, and he enjoyed power.

He was half conscious that that was the motive that had been behind his acceptance of the guardianship of the O'Rane family. He was too honest to shy away from it. He looked it squarely in the face.

He smiled a little as the taxi threaded its way through Camden Town.

The glare had abated, the heat had lessened. As the taxi chugged up the gritty incline of Haverstock Hill his strained eyes rested gratefully on trees. The roar of London dropped back. Men in tennis flannels were hurrying up the hill, a couple of Japanese turned out of a side street and loped under his car and across the road like lithe little animals. It pleased him; he liked to see men playing games, women sewing, children playing, kittens chasing their tails. His emotional side was so undeveloped that he honestly believed

conventional actions to be a sign of national health and individual purity and goodness.

It seemed almost like a personal compliment when he found Marjorie Moneypenny sewing in the garden.

The Moneypennys possessed one of those delightful slumbering houses that Hampstead still cradles jealously in leafy arms. It had been built originally in green fields, and being guarded by tall trees never woke to consciousness of the maze of houses that had grown up round it, and never lost its friendly, welcoming, country-house expression. There was something at once dignified and pathetic in the wide-eyed innocence of its many windows, the blandness of its easily opened oak door.

Augustus Moneypenny was a Hampstead enthusiast. His rooms were full of old paintings and prints of Hampstead, his library full of books about it. The purchase of Keats' house for the nation had been like a wedding in the family. The erection of a new house on an old site was like a funeral.

The desecrating hand of the garden expert had never been permitted in the Moneypenny property. Marjorie Moneypenny in white linen greeted Angus in surroundings from which Kate Greenaway might have just flitted.

"Hasn't it been hot!" she said. "Are you thirsty, Angus?"

Her smile, her eyes, her hair were bright and a little hard. It was as if Nature having secured a certain finish had lacquered and left her; one could not imagine her smile, her eyes or her hair fading or softening.

"Where's Bobbie de Bouton?"

"Oh, Bobbie couldn't come."

"Are you going abroad with him?"

"No, I've definitely decided not to. Where's your mother?"

"In the house, probably crying. *They're going*" she sighed.

"I thought they only came in on Saturday."

"That's all. Someone told mother the tradespeople told the maids how many times she changed and that was why they wouldn't stay. Since then we've changed our tradespeople with every new maid. Mother's writing to Harrods to deliver bread, but we've come to the end of the local milkmen."

"Where's your father?"

"Oh, he found a book on Hampstead in Petticoat Lane and he's gone to see if there really is a well in someone's garden."

"I've decided to accept the trusteeship. Bobbie de Bouton says I'm a prig."

"Oh, well!"—she dismissed that easily—"he's half French."

The garden was cool with twilight; stars twinkled like forgotten toys in the branches above her head. Angus looked at the neat straight gilt of Marjorie's hair, the bright blueness of her direct eye.

"You're awfully understanding," he submitted.

Marjorie smiled. She had no idea she had a compartmented mind into which people threw small troubles to be sorted out and little joys to be approved. She had no idea how nervously her friends fed her through the narrow openings in her sympathies fearing lest anything too lively, unwieldy or uncatalogued should

get through and upset her tight little mental perfection. Angus liked her because he never had anything but small and tidy offerings to present, and she assimilated those easily and gracefully.

"What sort of people are the O'Ranes?"

"Awful!"

"In what way?"

"Every way. You simply can't run life on sentiment and ideals, Marjorie. You must have a settled plan and discipline. O'Rane ran a sort of open house for rotters."

"What sort of rotters?"

"Artists, writers, musicians, an old clown."

"Good gracious!"

"I'm going to clear them out and put the household in order. The girls must go abroad, the boy must be educated. It's no good letting people grow up like that. They're a danger to the community."

"Will they mind?"

"Apparently they're in a state of siege now."

"Who?"

"All of them. You can understand the pensioners don't want to be turned out of free board and lodging, and the O'Ranes prefer their Bohemian mode of life. I daresay it's more exciting. Miss Fannie appears to be the chief rebel. Of course she's outside my jurisdiction. She's of age, but the others are minors. I'm not going to let those wastrels batten on the O'Rane children anyway. I expect that's why O'Rane nominated a guardian when he died. He saw the peril of the future, brought up as he had brought them up, and leaving them in the circumstances he did."

"It really is extraordinary!"

Mrs. Money Penny wandered through the French windows and came towards them; although she was nearly fifty her hair and eyes and smile were nearly as gleaming and bright as her daughter's; only with her something had slackened and withered beneath the lacquer. Her voice was quite feeble.

"How do you do, Angus? Hasn't it been hot? You are going to stay to supper, aren't you? That's right. Marjorie, I've just thought; it's no good having Harrods. They go next door."

"Try Whiteleys," advised Marjorie briskly.

Mrs. Money Penny turned to Angus. Her lower lip trembled.

"Fancy!" she said, "I only asked her for hot water in the bedrooms before dinner, and only last night I sent them to the cinema. I feel they don't bother about me at registry offices any more, and I've spent pounds on advertising."

Marjorie said after her mother had gone:

"The O'Ranes haven't ever seen you, Angus?"

"No."

"Well, I don't think Bobbie Bouton's is a bad idea."

"What idea?"

"Let them think you are he when you go there. It would give you time to look round, and they wouldn't be suspicious of you, only of him."

"Good gracious!" I'm not afraid of the O'Ranes. I'm their legal guardian. Look here! I'll tell you what Barton said about the legal position."

When he had finished Marjorie said:

"Well, my dear boy, you don't want to get in the papers."

"No, I don't."

"A girl like that isn't handicapped by any sense of honour or fair play."

"I'm not going to give in."

"It's no good using force," said Marjorie.

She looked at him. In the growing darkness his brown eyes looked very liquid, almost black, his face was strong and oval. She'd often thought of marrying Angus. They thought alike, or rather they assimilated the same sort of thoughts and impressions, they enjoyed the same prejudices. They would have a very happy, shiny, chintzy sort of home, and, unlike her mother, she would keep her servants.

Mrs. Money Penny called them in to supper.

Angus thought how pleasant it would be if they were going through the square of yellow light made by the windows to their own supper table without Mrs. Money Penny. The thought was like a cushion put for his mind. He rested on it, idly.

"Wine or lemonade, Angus?" said Mrs. Money Penny. "We can't have a new milkman, Marjorie; I've used the last. He's very deaf. He couldn't talk to them unless they shouted. I've never heard them shouting. Shall I tell them we'll do without the hot water in our bedrooms and ask them to stay?"

"I shouldn't, mother."

"I think I will, Marjorie. It's so difficult, Angus. I'd like to live in a hotel."

"It's no good, mother. They've got another place."

"But they haven't been out since they came here!"

"I know. The milkman found it for them."

IV

When Angus left the Moneypennys he walked home. He was in a queer mood. His mind ran in its accustomed grooves and then he pulled up sharply. He could not understand why it should pull up. His mind was unaccustomed to explorative excursions, it travelled towards clearly defined destinations.

Haverstock Hill was sharply black and white as he descended it; beyond Chalk Farm the hot yellow glare of lights engulfed him again. He tried to hitch his oddly pirouetting mind on to Marjorie Moneypenny but it refused to be hitched. The thought of her dulled him a little. It was as if she strayed, bright-eyed and neatly coiffured as usual, in blouse and skirt into a world that had inexplicably become *en fête*. He was sincerely troubled that he could no longer contemplate her with his usual gratitude for her healthy brightness, her practical common sense, her extreme comeliness.

Camden Town seemed to him strangely beautiful, full of tingling colour, great pools and oblongs and discs of extraordinary brilliance, the heaped shininess of plums and greengages and apricots on the barrows, the shinier ruby of the glistening meat, the silveriness of the fish stalls; the great bottles of coloured water in the chemists' shops glowed like mammoth fruit, and threading through this the people, black and white, somehow like pierrots and pierrettes in a highly deco-

rated carnival, with their questing colourless faces and their empty eyes.

At Mornington Crescent he turned off towards Bloomsbury and life dropped behind him, and the world grew black and white again and almost hushed.

It was a queer, unreal night, a night given over to summer magic with a cold moon rising high and clouds that seemed millions of miles off like black mountains. The houses, too, were like fallen black velvet mountains crouching on either side of him, making him feel incredibly little and lonely and somehow pathetic to himself. The shadows mothered lovers, the night was so still that their murmurs, their low laughter, even their kisses tip-toed across to him on it and seemed to tickle his ear mischievously.

He thought he would find out where the O'Ranes lived and have a look at their house. He tried to accept the idea of a sudden whim, but he knew it had been with him as a definite intention even before he left the Moneypennys.

He had great difficulty in finding it. The moon had reached the ebony mountains, the bald face of the clock that seemed to hang from the stars registered one o'clock.

Yet he did not find it. It found him. It found him in the queer way a church will suddenly find you—like a quiet answer to an unspoken question. He came out of a little, petty, twittering, prying street, the home of the smell of a thousand dishes, into the peace of it.

There was a garden in the square. He went into it and the trees spread themselves between him and the stars like lace over diamonds.

He did not hunt for the O'Ranes' house. He sat down on a seat and shut his eyes, and the darkness seemed to confer greater privacy than he had ever known.

Somewhere in the street he had left, a man, probably drunk, was singing in a powerful, unmusical voice. It had hardly any inflection or notes. In the little garden it had the mysterious monotony of a priest's chant.

One by one his drilled thoughts slipped out of their niches and went to play by themselves so that they were no longer his docile, familiar pupils but gay little unknowns who bewildered him. He seemed to run helplessly from one group to another.

He knew he had found the garden unlocked by chance because he could smell night-scented stocks, and he knew London dare not leave her flowers unguarded, but cherishes them with all her other imported treasures.

He opened his eyes and saw a little statue through the trees.

It was like something cut out in white paper and laid on black velvet, so stark and pale it was. It had goat's feet. It piped. It seemed to Angus it had piped time to a standstill, but when he looked at the clock that hung among the stars he saw that an hour had been stolen from him and lost.

It was two o'clock in the morning.

As he sought the exit to the twittering street he found the O'Ranes' house. It was tall and narrow and elegant like the others. The solidity of its front door

seemed almost like a rebuff. He stared up at it, and its darkened windows stared blindly down.

He raised his hat to it, and the foreignness of the action and the impulse woke him with a sort of shock. The magic of the night evaporated like mist. Marjorie Moneypenny came back suddenly like a real person into a dream.

Behind that door was muddle and overgrown ideals and disordered convention.

He was angry with himself like a man who has lost his way and had to find it again. Incredible that he *should* have lost it, because he knew it so well.

Things wanted putting straight, people wanted putting straight behind that door.

O'Rane had trusted him to do those necessary things he hadn't the strength of character to do himself.

He'd get behind that door by hook or by crook and see what common sense would do. He felt his common sense rush up to him in incredible strength; backed by that he could force anything.

Victory was in his walk when he left the square.

Bobbie Bouton was asleep on the sofa of their hotel sitting-room when he came in.

He sat up, absurdly rumbled, and pointed grinning to the clock.

"Been getting engaged all this time?"

"No."

Bobbie's brilliant blue eyes twinkled.

"That's good. Look here, I've been thinking the devil of a lot about this O'Rane business. It's not a bit of good your going swashbuckling in."

"I don't propose to."

Bobbie said, "Sorry, milord, sorry."

v

They held a council of war.

The blinds were half drawn so that glittering square gold mats of sunshine lay immediately below the windows of each end of the room and the rest was purplish shadow. Where it was deepest and softest they sat at an old round table, their elbows on it, staring at each other, three girls and a boy.

The boy said with a thrill of sheer glee in his voice, "I hereby declare a state of siege," and laughed.

The three girls did not laugh, they stared at each other with great, soft, serious eyes. Then Kane O'Rane said with a funny, impatient little wriggle of her shoulders:

"You can cut that out, Pat. Fannie is all right, but the rest of us are minors. He can do anything with us, anything with you."

"I'd like to see him! Huh! I suppose I could run away! Huh!"

Kane said, still wriggling her shoulders with nervous impatience: "Oh! Pat! don't be younger than you need! It's so trying!"

Fannie O'Rane got up from the table abruptly and walked to the window that faced the square. She stood on the mat of sunlight and became a figure in gold; pale gold her bare, angular, little-girl arms gripped behind her back, vivid gold the brown of her dress, deeper gold her crown of frizzy hair. This gold

figure standing square addressed them in the shadow over its shoulder. It said: "It's all so difficult. We don't want to antagonize him because we don't quite know what his power is. He comes into the house as an enemy, but we mustn't deny him admittance because he could force it if he wanted to. Oh dear! Oh dear! I'm only just beginning to realize what peculiar people we are."

Kane O'Rane's voice crisped from the shadows.

"I don't see that."

"No, if you weren't you would."

Pat O'Rane broke out, "Why can't we fight him, Fannie?"

Kane reined him in promptly: "My good young ass!"

When Fannie O'Rane moved out of the sunlight the room seemed to go dark. She said:

"It's all so difficult, my dears. We've lived so out of the world here. I don't know whether you can understand. I saw it when that lawyer talked. I mean, he showed me that the world thought father quite, quite mad. I think when the world was younger and there weren't so many people wanting so many things there were more like Daddy. There aren't any now. Father was a sentimentalist, an emotionalist. When the lawyer talked I suddenly saw things. I'm only trying . . . trying to tell you that it will, it *must* seem like a lunatic asylum to Angus Reid and his friend. People don't assume personal responsibility for other people . . . they pay rates and build workhouses . . . and . . . and screw enough out of people's fears of hell and hope of Heaven to build

institutions for people other people have kicked down! That's what they do! People don't work for individuals, they don't care about individuals. They work for something they call 'the Race' or 'the Community'; it gives them a sense of power . . . it gives them more scope. People like old Pip . . . they ticket them and tie them up in bundles and keep them somewhere till they die. All over London there are old people being kept in bunches till they die; in workhouses and almshouses, and young people kept in crèches and institutions and their ideas nipped off and their ambitions trimmed so that they shall fit in all the little dull corners of life where no one wants to be and round things off. I want you to see that . . . that those two young men thought father was mad, that's all."

Judy burst out:

"But Fannie, they couldn't turn old Pip and Miss Proctor out . . . after all these years. Why! They're so old! They were father's pensioners."

Fannie said in a low voice: "That's what I'm afraid of, Judy dear. That's what I'm going to fight. Daddy left no instructions, no provision for them in his will. My share of the money isn't sufficient to keep things going here and Mr. Reid has full control over yours. He can withhold. It is because of that we must propitiate him. Those old people . . . they're like children," she stopped and choked, she flung her hands out. "It's unthinkable! unthinkable!"

Judy wailed:

"What did Daddy do it for! What did he make Angus Reid our guardian for! We were so happy!"

"I think he got frightened. He realized when he was dying that he hadn't left us any real place in life. He made a place for us with his own brain and he was taking it with him."

Someone in the room below began to play a minuet. They played very sedately, softly. The player seemed to hesitate a little, the music came as if it were remembered rather than seen.

"Every day she practises," Fannie said; her lips trembled. "It isn't only them we've got to guard . . . it's their precious unfulfilled dreams. We've got to make Angus Reid see them as we see them . . . as Daddy saw them! Children! help me! help me! I'm afraid of Angus Reid. He's got such awful power."

Kane O'Rane said:

"You haven't told them anything about Mr. Reid?"

"Nothing! They'll think he and his friend are two more of poor old Daddy's down-on-their-lucks"—again she flung out her hands. "This isn't a real world we are living in. Daddy built it for us as he saw it . . . and no one sees like Daddy."

"I mustn't tell him what I think?"

"No one must tell him what they think, Judy. He's coming here to look around, probably to prepare a plan of action. He'll have to think; all we can hope for is to train him a little to think our way."

"Will he send me to school?"

"I don't know, Pat. He'll probably want to. He's coming to impose convention on us and conventional thinking. We know that. He's a conventional young man."

"I shall loathe him," said Judy.

"You mustn't show it. Don't put his back up. Whatever you do, don't put his back up! Remember, we have no place in his scheme of things, none at all. We've got to find him a place in ours."

Kane O'Rane said slowly: "It's going to be awfully, awfully difficult."

"I shall ask him not to mention his mission to . . . to those others," said Fannie. "Father gave them what they had never had . . . Security. I won't have it filched from them."

"When are they coming?" said Pat.

"To-morrow."

"Why is he bringing a friend?"

"I don't know," said Fannie, "I don't know."

VI

They arrived at twilight. They came swinging out of the little noisy twittering street. It was as if a door slammed sharply behind them, noise died. Here was something sleeping, sequestered under a lilac sky.

Bobbie Bouton said:

"Sanctuary. The damned place is enchanted." He looked at Angus, imps of mischief flickered in his bright blue eyes. "You know," he said, "you're risking something."

"What?"

"Your ready-made ideas, my friend."

Angus Reid said sharply: "Talk sense!"

The place did not welcome him, it permitted him. He looked at the tall, lean, gracious houses, and their

windows seemed curiously, hostilely blind, their stout doors implacable. They seemed to have stiffened all round him. The consciousness of hostility grew, it beat upon him, invisible and impalpable.

He said: "You writing devils, you're always on the lookout for things, trying to squeeze artificiality out of life. Any place looks mysterious at this hour."

Bobbie Bouton waved his arms.

"It'll mischief you," he prophesied.

"What will?"

Again he made that extravagant, comprehensive gesture.

"Everything, my friend. This is where Marjorie Moneypenny dwindles until she is no bigger than an incident."

Angus Reid said heartily: "You *are* an ass, you know."

A breeze suddenly swooped down on the motionless magic of the garden in the middle of the square. It shook the leaves and set them crisping and whispering together. The air seemed suddenly quivering with restless conjecture, expectation. The tall houses stared across the agitated tree-tops coldly and disinterestedly. The tiny storm ceased. Suddenly the leaves quieted. Their sharp knock echoed through the new silence.

Angus Reid said: "I think it's a silly idea our changing places. After all, I've got to assert my authority sooner or later. I'm determined to. Why not now?"

"As you please," said Robert.

The door opened. A little Punchinello of a manservant stood there. A smile widened genially under

his hooked nose. He said in a snappy, friendly little voice, staring at Bobbie Bouton:

"Mr. Reid, sir?"

Bobbie Bouton glanced at his friend, then nodded.

He took their bags, they passed with him into the massed shadows of the hall.

"It is nearly dinner time," said the little Punchinello. "Miss Fannie said she wished to see you as soon as you came. Will you go to your rooms first?"

"No," said Bobbie, with another swift glance at his friend.

"Then I will see to your luggage. Perhaps, sir, you will follow me."

Up the shadowy stairs.

Angus touched his friend's arm and whispered:

"Look here! Bobbie, we'd better cut this business out."

A suddenly opened door and the voice of the Punchinello:

"Mr. Angus Reid, Miss Fannie."

A long, long narrow room with a window at each end and twilight across them like lilac chiffon; more shadows humped and draped about the huge room, amethyst, violet, indigo shadows, the shadowy figure of a girl in a high-backed carved chair. She used the shadows as a veil, a screen, making herself in some queer way acquainted with them before she saw them.

The Punchinello snapped lights on, more lights, and the shadows retreated like servitors whose task is done.

She sat there watching them in the full glare of a dozen electric lights for a minute that seemed an hour,

throned in her big chair; something of the young queen there was about her, medieval, intensely aloof.

They stood there staring like surprised tourists.

She came towards them, and they saw that her hair was coarse and stood up from her head like burnished copper wire, that her eyes were grey and unfathomable. She said, prosaically enough:

"I am Fannie O'Rane. How do you do?"

They stood there quite still, well-dressed, modern young men. She frowned a little and looked at Bobbie de Bouton.

"Are you sure," she demanded, "that all those ideas you've brought with you are all right, infallible?"

The thought beguiled Bobbie immensely. He was delighted with it. That she should see his ideas arranged behind him like a well-trained bodyguard, when he knew them for an everchanging caravansary, that existed merely to give colour and zest to the moment, amused him.

Angus cut in: "Ideas are either right or wrong, Miss O'Rane, surely."

She looked at him sharply. He spoke very simply and his attractive brown eyes were really and genuinely puzzled.

She said: "It must be wonderful to be like that, *really* like that. So simply."

Then the door blew open and a girl blew in just like a brown leaf; her hair, her eyes, her freckles, her frock were all brown. She was delicious. Her mouth seemed red as the crimson beads round her little brown neck. She held the knob of the door and stood

swaying on her toes. She was the most unselfconscious thing in the world.

"Sorry, Fannie," she said. "I came to tell you dinner was ready."

Fannie said: "Mr. de Bouton, my sister Kane."

Kane gave a slip of a hand and a slip of a smile to Angus.

"And your guardian," said Fannie.

Kane gave Bobbie a queer, mischievous look.

"Do you come in sorrow or in anger?" said Kane; and then half unwillingly, "you're not what I expected."

Chapter II

I

THAT queer touch of baronial hall-ism was repeated in the dining-room; like the drawing-room above, it ran the whole length of the house and had a window at each end. The velvet curtains were drawn in a rich ruby glow across the window that overlooked the square; ordinary candles in great silver sconces burnt on the beautiful refectory table, and gave off pinpoints of golden light that flickered on the brown panelled walls and the beautiful sideboard and lent to the whole picture a generous mellow gleam and warmth. It had an almost emotional dignity and solidity, it seemed to exude a rich and unctuous benison. It had no period, this dark brown room with its golden and mahogany and amber lights; its atmosphere of gracious welcoming was not achieved by any conscious artistry, it was somewhat symbolical.

“Look at Pip’s garden, Guardian,” said Kane’s light voice, “you don’t often see a garden like that in London!”

The French windows at the other end of the room were open. Beyond it in the twilight lay an exquisite garden; the room made a frame for it, a dark frame for a fragile water-colour. The flowers glowed as if they were faintly phosphorescent.

"Pip's hands are full of flower magic," Fannie said.
"They are his children."

The hostility had gone from her voice. Her eyes met Bobbie's with an appeal he could not read.

Kane was making Angus known in her high gay voice.

"Mr. de Bouton. Miss Proctor."

A little thin woman with the shy, eager eyes of a child rose and bowed.

"Mr. Piperton, Papa Pip."

A little fat man with a bald pink head of delicate hue with a silvery, weedy fringe of curly hair rose and bowed.

"Mr. Cecil Cole, our Poet."

A little thin man with a soft, pointed, friendly little face with a pointed beard, like a sad little squirrel, acknowledged the introduction.

"Mr. Kerr."

A young clergyman held out his hand with a nervous grip.

"Mrs. Kerr."

A woman like a pale, drooping flower bowed and smiled.

"Now you know everyone," said Kane.

Bobbie de Bouton, standing back and watching, saw the room not only as a frame for the garden, but for all these people. It had opened to let him and his friend into the picture. It had closed round them again. He turned and saw the Punchinello manservant guarding the door. He sensed Angus standing very erect and feeling for ordered ideas like a prudent man feels for his pockets in a crowd.

Kane said to him in a low voice, as she dropped into a chair beside him :

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because this is going to be the most tremendous fun.”

She began to twitter biographies in his ear.

“Old Pip, Papa Pip, he’s been with us longest of all. Daddy found him starving in Italy. He’d been a clown in a circus. Some days he’s crippled with rheumatism; look at his poor old hands. Every year he goes to Olympia and Barnet Fair, and sometimes he sees circus announcements in local papers and slips away. We always know. He comes back looking as if he’d said good-bye to his children. Once he turned a somersault for the children in the Square garden. It hurt him dreadfully, but they only thought he was drunk. I heard them shouting, and I looked out of the window and saw him creep away. It was dreadful. He doesn’t know anyone knows. He’s nearly always in pain and he’s nearly always laughing; but he can smell a circus; it’s in his blood and sometimes the longing gets so strong he has to creep away and find one.”

“And the little woman opposite?”

“Miss Proctor?”

“She plays; she gives music lessons. Daddy found her in a home for decayed gentlewomen and rescued her because she wasn’t decayed enough, and she was suffering dreadfully. The matron hated her because she kept a real linen handkerchief to put under her head when she slept. They had pillow-cases like sail-cloth. She’s a queer little body. Her mother had beautiful linen. It stood for self-respect. The matron

couldn't understand that. It was something in her she couldn't break, like the will of a child." She paused and then added quite simply: "You see, the matron didn't know Miss Proctor's father had built the home before he went bankrupt and left them penniless."

"What does she do now?"

"She practises hours," said Kane. "And she's taught us all to play anything at sight. You see, just before her father died and all their trouble came upon them he was going to give an audition for her. All her friends told her she would make a great name."

"And would she?" said Bobbie, staring at the little woman.

"I don't know," answered Kane slowly. "I don't know. She still has the dress she was going to wear. I think the audition was to be at the Egyptian Hall, some place that's gone, anyway. It is such a quaint dress, Cambridge blue broche with waterfall sleeves. She believes if she could have a concert now she would achieve fame. She massages and exercises the muscles of her hands for hours. She's always dreaming about it. Fannie and I always know when she is thinking about it. She looks so young and happy. Once she met a musical critic at a Lyons teashop. He sat at her table and they killed a wasp together. She made him promise over the body that he'd come to her recital if ever she gave one. She came home so excited in a taxi, and then she forgot the taxi, and we thought it was waiting for the people next door and the beastly little clock thing ticked up over a pound before the taximan knocked us up," she laughed.

"And the little man who writes?"

"Oh, he's written a book of poems, all about pink flamingoes flying against angry red skies, and black ducks winging home through black storms. All his skies and birds match, you'd think they were chameleons. He's tried every publisher in England and America, but they all want him to pay for publication. He thinks he's only got to be printed to be acclaimed, that's his dream. Pat reads Greek and Latin as if it were English. He reads poetry with Mr. Cole for two hours every morning."

"Mr. Cole could do other things."

"Oh no, he couldn't. He looks well and ruddy, but he's got the highest blood-pressure in London. It's really wonderful. Specialists are always ringing him up and asking him if he's dead and then they laugh. The telephone is in the hall. Some of the most expensive specialists have such funny laughs you can hear them right upstairs; it sounds like little shut-up dogs barking. He has to be very, very quiet and not get excited. He says he lives in the gloaming; but sometimes he gets out of it and goes up to town. He's welcome in every heart-specialist's and blood-specialist's house because he oughtn't to be alive. They get dreadfully excited and affectionate, and get out little instruments and pop them about on him, and he registers all sorts of funny things no one ever registered before. As far as he can gather they can't prove anything by him and this makes them quite emotional and they send him upstairs to have tea with their wives and see the children's photographs. He has many pleasant afternoons like that."

Bobbie looked down the table and saw Angus talk-

ing to Fannie. He looked at Kane. Like a brown leaf she had blown into his careless life, brown her frock, her eyes, her freckles, scarlet her beads, her fresh uptilted mouth. She was transient, the next puff of wind would carry her away again. His mind stilled lest she should stir and take flight.

He said slowly:

"I knew perfectly well this place was enchanted."

II

After dinner they went to the drawing-room.

Miss Proctor sat down at the piano, and thin, gay music began to trickle through the conversation; they spoke of flowers as if they were children, books as if they were comrades, great pictures as if they were personal possessions.

Bobbie had a sudden absurd vision of this house held as a fortress against the world and the world going whirling and crashing by.

Fannie excused herself and slipped away.

"I wonder," she said to Angus and Bobbie, "if you'd come to my den when you've had your coffee and a cigarette? It's at the end of this passage, facing you."

In a second the curate's wife had risen and followed her.

Her husband held out his hand detainingly. His eyes questioned and hers evaded. Her pretty smile was an evasion, the little careless wave of her hand.

"Must speak to Fannie, Philip," she said with the urgency and impatience of a child, and was gone.

She was too slight, too colourless. There were blue

shadows beneath her blue eyes. Her transparency, her frailty, her listlessness were her chief characteristics, yet in moments of excitement her vitality burst through them, glowed like something warm encased in glass.

She was like that when she reached Fannie O'Rane's room, suddenly vivid, alive. She burst in like an excited child. "I went back this afternoon, Fannie, to see the girls!"

She was unrecognizable as the pale, flower-like girl who had drooped at the dinner table.

"Oh! Gladys!" said Fannie, and sat still staring out at the little garden.

The girl Gladys stretched out her arms in a queer, theatrical little gesture. She stood there as if crucified, tawdry, a little pathetic. Life seemed to drain from her visibly; she was white and apathetic again.

"Oh! you are a little fool!" said Fannie.

Gladys crumpled down in a green armchair; she said:

"I never asked to be a sort of Mrs. God. I wasn't cut out that way."

Fannie O'Rane whirled round on her.

"It isn't the wicked people who cause the trouble and wrong and disillusionment in life, it's the people who are just silly little fools like you. It's not the people who want repressing, it's the people who want protection. If there was any sense in it I wouldn't mind, Gladys, if it helped you at all or in any way. I know your life isn't easy. . . ."

"Easy!" said Gladys. "You don't know anything about it. Do you know what time I got up this morn-

ing, what we had for breakfast, what I did? Not you! When I'd finished I was filthy, so I boiled some water and had a bath, and when I'd finished it old Mrs. Curlew called and asked me to go and help her clean the church brass because her daughter's baby was going to be christened that afternoon and she didn't like it dirty. Mr. Curlew is churchwarden. I had to smile and go. She'd brought white sweet peas and daisies for the altar vases. She did them while I cleaned the brass. She said her daughter had read the little flowers of St. Francis or something and they were going to call the baby Francis. I said wasn't he the dirty old man who tamed fleas and bugs and things? She said that people had complained the church brasses were not kept properly. She knows what the funds for the cleaning are. It's not fair to talk like that. Then she said she thought Philip was young to be vicar. You know how Philip loves his church. Fannie, I was frightened. I offered to clean the lectern. I was cleaning that great bird at half-past two. When I went home Philip had had some bread and cheese and gone. It was awful in that house, everything wearing out and everything dirty, and the sun pouring in. Philip cleaned the windows at half-past four this morning. That seemed to let the sun in worse."

"Does Philip clean his own windows?"

"We can't afford four-and-six every month out of two hundred a year. Once old Miss Bassett saw him doing it late in the evening and she wrote him a horrid letter saying it offended his parishioners to see their

vicar doing menial work, so now he has to get up early and do it."

Fannie said very gently: "But, my dear, how can it help you to go back?"

"I saw the new models, Fannie, they were simply lovely; all the girls were awfully nice. I tried on some of the hats, they weren't busy and old Lemmon was doing the wholesale houses. Some of them did suit me. I could have had them trade price. I bought a little bunch of cowslips and I got some ideas for doing up my own rags. Oh! Fannie you *can't* understand how I *love* pretty things. All the years before Philip married me I was always touching them and thinking about them . . . and they were always there, and I could plan which I'd have. Sometimes it's an ache . . . an ache! Oh! you don't understand! I know I'm petty, I know I'm little . . . but I wasn't cut out to be Mrs. God. I saw old Stewart to-day. He's chief buyer now; and he's got a little place at Bushey and a little car and a housekeeper, so the girls were telling me. He wanted to marry me before I met Philip."

"I can't understand, Gladys! You love Philip."

"One of our girls married a shipping agent in a big way; and another married a doctor . . . and one day they came back, just to finger things and talk and make toast over the gas fire. They said it was hard to get out of some things, liking yourself best in black and linking arms. We asked them how they dressed their babies. That's the sort of question you ask and that's how your mind runs. Oh! you're not a shop girl, you don't understand! It's lonely out of business,

so lonely! You can't ask anyone what they pay for things in private life; they don't like it, but it's all awfully interesting and exciting."

"I can't see it."

"That's just it, only those who've been in business know. Sometimes I ache! I have to pretend with Philip. He's always expecting me to have wonderful thoughts, and how can I tell him they're of hats and cami-knickers and things. If you could see your soul and keep it nice and buy it things I'd be interested in it, but how can you think a thing that is hidden matters so frightfully? I wasn't meant to be a poor clergyman's wife!"

"No, but you might try. Philip believes in you so tremendously, reveres you so terrifically."

"I do try, I do try. Sometimes in church I try so hard to get near something that the palms of my hands get hot. I don't want to let Philip down. I work like a charwoman. I try to make the parish like me. I try not to think that they're a tiresome lot of old maids who like God because they think He's a man. Sometimes when I stare very hard at the stained glass windows I do get a feeling of being lighter and better . . . but I know its only the colour. I used to get just that feeling unpacking a box of French flowers. There was a wreath of purple velvet clematis once. I cried over it. Things like that affect me. I'm wicked, Fannie, that's what I am."

"Not wicked, kid, only silly, but it doesn't help you any, and it's weakening."

Gladys only said: "I hope I never have a little girl."

"Why?"

"Oh! just knowing how you could make her look and how she ought to look."

"Do you ever talk to Philip about the shop?"

"Never. He thinks I've forgotten. I wasn't there so very long. I came up from Cornwall to be a governess, but I left after three months and went into a shop. I never told my people about the shop. They'd have been shocked. I had to tell Philip. I met him at the house of a friend who thought I was still a governess. If I had told her she would have told my people. After I fell in love with Philip I went home and we were married from there."

"Why didn't you like being a governess?"

"I think it was the daily walk; and then they were quite nice to me when we were alone, and when people came they treated me as if I'd suddenly gone dead and they were talking over my corpse. The housemaid was very fond of me. She used to send all my letters on to the shop before anyone got hold of them. My people wrote their last letter of congratulation there and Maggie sent it on to me. Philip wanted me to tell them I hadn't been in the same post all the time, but it would only have hurt them. I never told. I wanted to be a mannequin, but I was too small and too thin. I would have loved that."

"Can't you get away from it, Gladys?"

Gladys said from the depths of her armchair:

"Why should I? It's the only thing that interests me. I mean . . . a man . . . Oh! I can't explain, but when a thing interests a man he makes a career of it. A woman . . . Oh! I can't explain."

Clothes are poetry to me. Ever since I was a little girl, you know, dressing up my dolls and all that. I was happy in business. I loved to handle things, to see how beautiful they were. At night . . . when they weren't letting any more customers in I used to go through and see the stuff hanging like banners, like fairyland. Some of the things were so dainty . . . the little boudoir caps and negligées. To be well dressed, that seems to me . . . I can't explain. It isn't envy exactly. I can't explain. Even in church when Philip's preaching . . . a hat'll wipe it all out if I like that hat. It's awful. Oh! I know. I try to cure it, I keep away from shops. Only sometimes, like this afternoon, you feel, you feel . . . Oh! I don't know!"

Fannie said, troubled: "Oh, my dear, I know, but you've got to fight it. There's all your life."

There was a knock at the door.

Fannie called, "Come in."

Angus Reid and Robert de Bouton entered.

Gladys Kerr said: "I'll go back to Philip and the others," and slipped away.

But Philip Kerr was in the garden with Papa Pip and Coles the poet; and only Kane and Judy sat in the twilight drawing-room listening to Miss Proctor's playing.

Gladys sat down by Kane and shut her eyes. She was very white and inert, more the drooping flower than ever.

Miss Proctor's music poured over them in quiet, limpid waves.

After quite a long interval Kane found that Gladys

Kerr had come alive. She was whispering to her, smiling like a child.

"Kane, Miss Elder was turning out a lot of old things for the rummage sale the other day and there was an old grey flowered silk, just what they're wearing now, you know, little faint bunches of flowers all over it. I asked her to give it to me."

Judy bent forward. Gladys swept her into a suddenly gay and sparkling discussion. She was so pretty, so eager, like a child with a prize.

"My dear! it's lovely stuff. It would make a darling little frock and there's enough in the skirt to make a little cape thing. Of course one'll have to cut carefully."

"Has Fannie seen it?" Judy said.

"No. No, I thought I'd make it up as a surprise. I brought it with me. It's upstairs. I thought perhaps . . ."

"Let's go and see it," humoured Judy.

"I've got some mauve shot silk I never had made up," said Kane. "Perhaps, if it matched, it might line the cape."

Gladys linked her arms in theirs; they were suddenly a trio of schoolgirls, gay, happy, anticipating.

Miss Proctor's music flowed over an empty room.

III

"Won't you smoke?" said Fannie gravely. "We have a lot to talk about."

She had not moved. She sat with her back to the wide open window and the upraised mesh of her wiry

hair made a cloudy coronet for her. She turned on no lights. She said:

"I want us to understand each other," and sat thinking.

Her repose was as startling as a foreign gesture, it invested her with extraordinary dignity. All around her was a tranquillity and peace that the two young men had not known in the noisy hotel by which traffic crashed at all hours.

"I would have refused you admittance," she submitted quietly, "but I preferred to let you into our lives. It seemed to me the only way. We were reared as sentimentalists. We are living the lives of sentimentalists."

"Sentiment is often an excuse to ignore the facts of life, Miss O'Rane," said Angus.

She inquired with a queer little smile what were the facts of life. Angus stiffened instantly.

"Frankly I don't see that a discussion of the abstract is going to help either of us, Miss O'Rane. I put my cards on the table. I am an average man. I leave romance and sentiment to novelists and women. There are enough of both in the world to keep it going. I am concerned with concrete things. Had your father felt happy in his mind about your future and died assured that he had left everything arranged for you he would never have nominated me your guardian and trustee, he would never have seen the slightest necessity for one."

"You!" said Fannie. "I understood you were Mr. de Bouton!"

Angus said: "I wasn't sure what was the spirit in

which we would be received. We decided to change identity for the moment as a means of protection. Briefly, I wanted to spy out the land and I didn't want all the family's attention concentrated on me. I thought you would be suspicious and self-conscious. I had no intention of keeping up the deception after I found out how the land lay. I am Angus Reid and that is my friend Robert de Bouton. Am I clear?"

"Quite," said Fannie. "It wasn't a bad idea. As far as the others are concerned I should keep it up a little longer: it will leave you freer, enable you to get a better perspective of everything. Kane and Judy and Pat, they'll talk to you more frankly if they don't think it's so vital to impress you and convert you. You've been sprung on us, Mr. Reid, a bolt from the blue; and we're frightened for ourselves and for others."

He said: "Miss O'Rane, you're living a fairy-tale and you've got to wake up."

She said: "I felt you'd say that. Mr. de Bouton, won't you smoke?"

"There isn't a community in London like this one."

"Does it make it wrong?" she countered.

"That's not the point. You see me as an enemy. I see you as a duty laid upon me by a dead man. I have never shirked duty. I am going to see this thing through."

"But how? But how?"

"By applying common sense."

"You terrify me," she said. She was perfectly honest and spoke without a trace of humour.

"It pays these people gathered here to humour you, as they humoured your father, with the belief that life

is a sort of fairy-tale. One supposes (if you will forgive me) that it pleased your father's natural vanity to pose as a benefactor, to feel that he had cornered off a little bit of the world and made it heaven for a little crowd of derelicts. I say that he was criminally imposed on and that you are being imposed on. I can see it."

She said: "You can't! You can't!" and struck her small hands together in the darkness.

"My dear young lady!" he objected, "I can!"

That quieted her. Up to then she had appealed to him for help and understanding without realizing his foreignness. Now he answered her in an alien tongue and she realized that nothing she had said yet had reached him. It steadied her, so did his next remark.

"What chance have your sisters and brother got reared in this fantastic atmosphere?"

She said: "They don't lack anything but prejudices, Mr. Reid."

From his dark corner Robert de Bouton spoke a little sadly.

"Miss O'Rane, you can't get anywhere without them in the world, not anywhere."

He lit a cigarette, the match flared in his square brown face with its puggy, blunt-ended little nose and brilliant, twinkling blue eyes.

Fannie O'Rane said in a whisper, "Oh! Mr. Reid, what are you going to do? What are you going to do? All our money goes to keep up this place . . . mine and Kane's and Judy's and Patrick's."

"Do you think that's fair or just?"

"They are content."

"They are too young, too ignorant to be anything else. You have no right to keep them in this back-water."

"They are happy," she defended.

"Because they don't know normal life, that's why. They're the sacrifices to sentimentality, but they don't know it."

"You hit hard."

"I've got to," he submitted curtly.

"But you're judging us without knowing us."

"My judgment is the judgment of the average man, Miss O'Rane," he assured her.

He was a little angry, also a little ill at ease. The quietness, the twilight. He felt somehow that she had the advantage of him sitting there and feeling him with her mind. He felt as if he were being asked to live in a book or a play and behave that way.

"Look at it baldly and coldly and crudely," he implored her curtly. "Your father was not like other men."

"I admit it," she acquiesced instantly. She seemed to run a flag up in the darkness and stand beneath it. In some queer way it gave her a vantage-point over him.

"He was a sentimentalist," Reid went on, "an idealist. In the old days he would have been a Crusader. He was a fantastic and charming person who refused to conform to conventional standards. He adored his wife. When she died it became increasingly difficult for him to face reality and life as it was. It jarred him, it hurt him, it depressed him. I imagine that

during her life she stood between him and the outer world. She took the place of his mother."

"Father wouldn't have hurt a fly, Mr. Reid."

"Exactly! Not out of consideration for the fly, Miss O'Rane, but out of consideration for himself. You illustrate his whole attitude to life."

"I do not think it needs defending."

"I am analysing it, Miss O'Rane. I want you to see how and why it moulded your lives in the peculiar way it has; and why it is necessary that you should . . . wake up to reality. The training of the next few years is vital to Judy and Pat. It is essential that they should get a normal, everyday point of view because they will have to live in a normal everyday world, earn money in it, marry in it."

"You think that Papa Pip and Miss Proctor and Mr. Cole are just clever pauper impostors who could earn their living if they tried?"

"Undoubtedly, Miss O'Rane. There is no doubt about it. I know that you have nothing but contempt and dislike for my point of view, but I ask you to try and look at it squarely for a few minutes. The discipline of work is good for people. There is nothing in the world so undisciplined or so immoral in its effect as uncontrolled charity and sentimentalism. It makes parasites and paupers and wastrels at every step. All these people in this house are parasites created by your father. That's the long and short of it. He took out their backbone and removed their usefulness. He offered them security in order to secure his own mental security . . . that's what it amounts to. Let us understand each other. I am not going to let them

batten on those youngsters. That's what they're doing . . . eating into their inheritance. I went into accounts with your father's solicitor, Barton. It takes your united incomes to run this hostel for these old people. Your father's debts have already made a hole in this year's dividends. To keep these pensioners you are not only mortgaging your future, but you are deliberately sacrificing those youngsters and denying them the equipment that is absolutely necessary for life. It isn't right. It isn't honest. It isn't reasonable. You are sacrificing youth to age, your own kith and kin for strangers who have nothing but a slight sentimental claim on you. I tell you quite candidly, I am not going to stand for it. I regard it as criminal."

He was hot, aggressive, priggish. Bobbie, who knew him, could have hit him, he was so angry with Reid for obliterating the other side of himself so completely and devastatingly. He was smug! smug! smug! He saw a wilderness between these two where there might have been paths of understanding.

She said: "Kane will be twenty-one next year, and then . . ."

"You mean that you and she will carry on? Miss O'Rane, don't let your feelings run away entirely with your common sense. Already your house, your domestic arrangements are eating into your combined capital. In a few years it will have entirely absorbed the portion of the inheritance which is yours and Miss Kane's. Your pensioners will be older, more helpless, more dependent than they are to-day, and you will be forced to abandon them."

"Why?"

"Economic necessity. You cannot run any form of charity on credit."

She said: "You're perfectly beastly . . . inhuman. . . . Your belief in human nature is jaundiced. Of course you've got legal power. Father would have hated you if he'd known you . . . you're narrow, you're little, you're insular. You judge without knowing . . . a beastly little British tin god. I . . . I hate you."

He was awfully quiet, almost impersonal. As her temper quickened, his cooled; as she let go, he tightened. They were like people at two ends of a seesaw. She was up in the air continually. He was on the ground level.

"I am sorry for all this. Of course I foresaw it. I am quite prepared to sacrifice your good opinion for my own. Judy and Pat are dependent on me. I don't let my dependents down."

"No, but you force me to let mine down."

"That is where we utterly disagree. They are not your dependents."

She grew dreadfully quiet then with a controlled forced tranquillity that he knew had whitened her face.

"I am making an enemy of you," she said; "that is fatal. I have an Irish temper. History has proved that fatal. I want to explain my attitude. I have to explain it. I was father's mother. I am a mother to all these people who are so much older than I. You threaten my . . . my motherhood, and all that is protective in me rises up. They are all children.

Oh! I feel I'm not getting near you! I feel it! There's a wall! What can I do to break it down? To keep them happy, smiling, believing, hoping . . . that has been my work ever since I can remember. In this house, Mr. Reid, abide peace and comradeship and charity such as you have never known. We are simple here and we are good. We live in love for each other. Oh! you are laughing!"

"I am not laughing," said Angus. "I am trying with an adult mind to understand a fairy-tale."

"You say you don't understand," she caught him up. "Won't you defer action until you do . . . until you know positively that we are wrong and you are right?"

"I do not see how that can be," he murmured.

"You pride yourself on being fair and just," she argued. "Won't you give us a chance? Give us a month's test. Live amongst us and see how we live. Judy and Pat could not go to school till September anyway. There wouldn't be anything lost. You could get to know Pat and Judy and Kane and discover what they are best suited for. It wouldn't be wasted time. You could use this place as an hotel, coming and going; but we should be living our normal, everyday lives. It isn't much to ask; just a month. If at the end of that time you see things as you see them now, I won't stand out against you. I'll give in. Surely that's fair?"

"I can't see what's gained by it, Miss O'Rane. The financial aspect will be what it is now."

"But you may see other aspects."

"I think not."

"But you cannot know. Keep your friend's name and watch us, study us, criticize us. It is of your friend Kane and Judy and Pat will be suspicious, not you. Change places for a month and watch us. A month is such a little while. I beg you to do this thing."

"You make it very difficult for me, Miss O'Rane; it is merely delaying inevitable action."

Robert de Bouton said slowly:

"It's sporting, Angus. I don't see how you can refuse. You lose nothing."

"I promise, whatever I feel, not to stand in the way of any arrangements you make with regard to Kane, Judy and Pat; not to influence them. I undertake to stand in with you. I can't say more. Let them go on thinking you are Robert de Bouton and your friend is Angus Reid. They are not self-conscious; they will have no reserve. If you act now you will act blindly, but if you act then you will act with knowledge."

"I don't see what else we can do, old boy."

Angus Reid said stiffly:

"Very well, Miss O'Rane, I agree, but I warn you that at the end of a month I shall feel as I feel to-night and act accordingly. It is a respite."

"I am playing fair," she said. "If my sisters try to influence you at all it will be your friend who will get the benefit of it. You will merely watch us living as we have lived for years."

IV

Later in his room Angus wrote to Marjorie Money-penny: "They are an incredible crowd. The girl

O'Rane is one of these frightfully emotional people, I should imagine. Bobbie and I had a long séance with her this evening in which she tried to explain her point of view. I explained why Bobbie and I had changed names and the reason for it, and she begged us to continue the deception in order that I should get to know the family better. I have agreed to mark time for a month and observe the land. I am quite sure my observation will merely confirm my present point of view with regard to it all. They are all handsome in a wild way, and there is no actual harm in the old people they have taken under their wing; they seem a happy but wildly unpractical crowd—a rather spacious and pleasant lunatic asylum, in fact. I hope your mother got some maids. I met a clergyman here to-night. Shall I ask him? It's the sort of parish that might produce maids."

There was a knock at the door and Papa Pip entered.

"I wondered," he said, "if you had everything you wanted?"

"Everything, thank you," said Angus.

The old man walked to the open window and stood looking down at the garden.

"You haven't everything or you wouldn't be here," he said gently. "People who've everything don't come here."

"What sort of people do come here?" asked Angus.

"People who want refitting," said Papa Pip.

"And Miss Fannie fits them and sends them on their way again."

"Clothes, food and money, I suppose?" said Angus curtly.

"Not always," said Papa Pip; "sometimes they've lost their courage and their hope. Have you ever realized what a lot of people wear out and want re-fitting?"

"No," said Angus curtly.

"They sit in my garden," said Papa Pip, "and sometimes it comes back to them there . . . the thing they've lost. This is a house for tired hearts and broken dreams. Miss Fannie patches them up."

"Do they pay?" said Angus.

"Sometimes they pay if they can, sometimes they work, mend and help in the garden."

"I see," said Angus.

Papa Pip shook his head.

"You listen; but you don't see," he contradicted gently. "One day you will see. Miss Fannie is a great woman. If you've everything you want perhaps I'd better go. We don't have many people like that here. Do you like circuses?"

"I used to when I was a boy."

"You are only a boy now." He peered at Angus gently as a father might have done. "I don't know," he said, "I don't think you ever were a boy. Perhaps that is what you have come here to find . . . your youth."

Chapter III

I

LOVE had made Bobbie de Bouton an ally. He suspected that within twenty-four hours of his meeting with Kane O'Rane; before another twenty-four hours he knew it.

Fannie O'Rane felt it too, although she did not sense its cause.

She kept him a minute in the sunny breakfast-room after the others had gone and searched his face with anxious eyes.

Through the window they could see Papa Pip busy in his garden; the thin music of Miss Proctor practising floated down to them; the little poet had gone to his room to write an ode to Spring.

They had all scattered happily, rather like busy birds; somehow they met like birds who have travelled far, builded much, and have tales to tell. There was a gay eagerness about their reunion three times a day, there was laughter, happiness, gaiety in the sun-dappled room. There was an extraordinary air of things doing and stirring.

"Have we a chance?" Fannie O'Rane said. "He doesn't see, Mr. de Bouton, he just doesn't see. He sits there like someone who doesn't understand our language . . . with his mind tight, tight in a

little round hard knob. I'm not sleeping. It kills me to think of them in a month perhaps being turned out, homeless. I see the trust in their old eyes. I hate him! I hate him! I hate him for his smugness and his priggishness, for the conventionality and cruelty of it all. How can we reach him. He has no heart or soul."

"You're wrong," said Robert de Bouton quietly. "I've known Reid since he was a kid. All his life he's had to manage things, to make decisions, to act for other people. He's had a long, narrow road to travel for other people and he's travelled it steadily and successfully and honestly and damned unselfishly, stifling the desire to look to right or left so that it has become a habit to look only ahead at the ultimate issue. He's a sacrifice on the altar of duty. He's had no youth, he's had no fun. He's white all through and I've watched him make big sacrifices quietly and simply. He had to take a road mentally almost before he knew he'd got a brain, and he's slogged along it for the benefit of the greater number. His father left the estate terribly involved and practically penniless. Angus has put all that right. He had cohorts of jabbering female relatives who depend on him. He's had all the ghastly responsibility of domesticity without its fun or compensations." His honest brown face was grave. "Angus Reid is fine, Miss O'Rane, but he's never learnt to be romantic or sentimental."

"You'll do what you can? You see he has absolute power. If he denies us the money we simply cannot carry on here. You've seen Papa Pip and Miss Proctor and little Mr. Cole . . . there's nothing for

them but the workhouse. Oh! it's unthinkable. Papa Pip would die without his garden. They're so happy. They do no harm. They do so much good. Oh! we must break something down and show him! *Make him see!*"

Her little heart-shaped face was deathly white, her eyes were dark with pain.

"It hasn't been easy for me," she said. "The only grown-up among children. I'm lonely as a queen. I've been lonely all my life. Long, long ago I learnt that if you are to be the head, the directing force, of anything you must live withdrawn from those you direct, you mustn't be familiar or you lose authority and they lose their belief in you. I never had a play-time either, but it hasn't made me hard and narrow and hidebound like your friend. Even with Kane and Judy I had to be . . . up there. I daren't come down to their level, I daren't go shares in life with them or they wouldn't have heeded me when I forbade things, as I have had to sometimes. Lonely hours I spend in that study just to create the necessary atmosphere. Daddy loathed responsibility; before I was twelve I had learnt to quell familiarity in servants, to hold myself apart. I have even learnt to be stately, to be grave and judicial. I wasn't born like that. I have never taken parts! I am the judge in this house, the final note in everything."

"It seems to me that you and Angus Reid are so alike."

"Alike! My goodness!"

"Perhaps that's why you dislike him so. You've both been at the head and now strive for mastery over each

other. Two monarchs who cannot brook insubordination."

Her troubled mind was pliant; he could feel it bend to catch his new ideas, but when she and Angus Reid talked together it was like two ramrods, two absurd ramrods so alike and so ununitable in the stiffness of their pride and arrogance.

He thought her very beautiful with her strange, intense eyes and her stivery, coppery hair. A little creature of mood and temperament bravely schooled and held in check. There was something pathetic in her self-restraint, as if she were a warm little fire shut away behind ice.

"I shall always loathe him," she said, "always. A petty, bricked-in mind—that's what he's got. He's a tyrant, a suburban tyrant."

The door opened and Angus Reid came in.

He came in charmingly, unself-consciously, the brown face animated, the brown eyes sparkling. He looked extraordinarily handsome and attractive. He caught sight of Fannie O'Rane. He stiffened. He became arrogant.

Bobbie Bouton looked from his friend to Fannie. They had both changed. He knew neither of them.

He patted the white tablecloth nervously; his jolly, snub-featured brown face was perturbed.

"Look here," he said, "you're both here, so it wouldn't be a bad opportunity . . . I want to tell Miss Kane O'Rane I'm not Angus Reid. It makes it jolly awkward in lots of ways. As far as the others are concerned it doesn't matter. What? Well, what?"

His brilliant blue eyes twinkled from one to the other.

"I don't see that it makes any difference," said Fannie. Her smile was utterly charming, it rooted in her clear eyes and spread till it flowered in her dimples.

"I see no reason to alter the original arrangement or make any exception with regard to Miss Kane," said Angus Reid.

"It puts me at a disadvantage."

"Naturally," said Fannie.

"I fail to see it," said Angus.

Bobbie's attractive grin became more nervous and more pronounced.

"As a matter of fact I'm afraid I shall have to. I am going to a circus this afternoon with Miss Kane and Papa Pip. I don't feel Angus Reid would enjoy it at all, but it is exactly the thing for a simple, unsophisticated little chap like Bobbie Bouton."

"You mean you're going to tell her?" said Angus.

"Well, yes, that was rather the idea, in fact quite the idea," he paused. "I think it was rather a silly idea changing names, anyway."

"I think the circus is an absurd idea."

"I think it is a topping one," said Bobbie and escaped thankfully.

And Fannie suddenly boiled over.

"Weren't you ever young and jolly?" she demanded of Angus.

He looked at her as if she were a tiresome little child.

"Exactly why?"

"Oh! you throw cold water on everything and everybody . . . nasty, elderly cold water."

"I am sorry that is your opinion."

She clasped her hands.

"There, I've done it again! There's something in me makes me just . . . just spit out. Please, please forget it!"

"Certainly. It made no impression."

"We shall drive you away."

"I am afraid not, Miss O'Rane. I agreed to stay a month and I am going to stay that month. It is my habit to keep my word."

II

They came out into the sun-flooded field; rooks cawed in the great elms that plumed it on two sides; beside them, as if dispersed by a giant hand pushing, surged waves of hot, chattering children.

Kane said: "Dear old Papa Pip; he'll stay and help feed the animals and gossip on the steps of the caravans. Wasn't it wonderful to see him. Like someone come home after years of exile. He didn't know we were there even. To gain happiness so cheaply. It makes me feel humble. I want such a lot."

He said: "You deserve a lot."

She said: "Oh, no! Fannie does. Fannie is wonderful. Everything—all the happiness and the peace and the comfort in the house and the things we've learnt come from Fannie. She's up there. Of course you don't know her . . . no one quite knows her, being up there."

He said: "I don't want to talk about Miss O'Rane. If I were an artist I'd want to paint her, but I don't want to talk about her, Miss Kane. I want to talk about you. I've never wanted to talk about anything so much."

He was desperately in earnest; his knubbly little brown face, with its fierce, jutting chin, its stubby features, was solemn as a judge; even his vivid eyes had lost their droll twinkle, they were blue as stones set in copper. He said:

"What would you do if someone made you a present of the world suddenly?"

"I'd be terribly embarrassed. I'd want to run away from it."

"You couldn't," he said. "You couldn't even wrap it up and take it away, it would just be there."

"The ideas you have!" she said.

She was delicious, there in the dusty country road with the powdery white cow-parsley like lace on either side of her, with the dark shimmer of leaves above her. She was a gipsy dryad with the kiss of the wind and the sun on her little neck and her little brown face.

He said:

"Make a gift to me, Miss Kane. This wonderful evening, as a memory."

"You mean?"

"Spend it with me. Let's walk through it until we find a little inn where they'll leave the stars in the trees to light a little dinner-table in the garden. I am stuck fast in enchantment. Don't unstick my feet and tell me to follow the tramlines home. I couldn't bear it."

There was solemnity behind his whimsies. The laughter and carelessness died in her brown eyes.

"I don't know. . . ." she said. "There's Fannie. . . ."

The sun washed up the empty road and down the empty road. They had stopped under a great elm. It made a great grey shadow wing at their feet; through it the sun chinked like scattered nuggets. He saw questions grow in her clear young eyes, questions that lived and died like things that have no stems or roots.

"I ought not to," she said.

"We shall be home by ten. When one is nineteen they shut up fairyland at ten."

"But you are twenty-five."

"I think—I am almost sure—they will give me a bit to take home."

"What will you do with it?"

"Madam, I shall savour it exceedingly and guard it with my life."

She laughed, her womanhood jumped down, her childishness leaped up, frolicked in her eyes, her voice, even her impatient little feet stirring in that wing of grey shadow.

"It would be great sport," she said.

He made her climb the bank and look over the hedge; she saw the hot translucent shimmer of green cornfields, the vivid stain of poppies here and there and the warm rust of sorrel. Far beyond the smoke of village fires went up into the quiet blue of the evening sky, and with no breeze stirring, made a gate on the horizon. The gate of fairyland he called it, and said by ten they must be the other side.

"I know what lies the other side," she said; "but what lies this?"

"I do not know," he told her; "I am a tourist here for the first time."

As they walked they talked, and as they talked the sun died and left the world pink and flushed like the inside of a sea-shell.

She said: "I am glad you're not my guardian but my friend. I can't talk to Judy, she's too young, and Pat's too prejudiced; and Fannie's too far off. One can't; she's always calm and kind and balanced, one doesn't know what lies underneath. I've never seen her in a temper, or unjust, or very excited. She's like that. I can't talk to Papa Pip and Miss Proctor or Mr. Cole—they're different; so much younger than I am."

"Talk to me."

"I'm frightened—horribly frightened. You can feel how they hate each other . . . Fannie and your friend Angus Reid. . . . He'll turn them all out at the end of the month—Papa Pip and Mr. Cole. They're like two cats. I never thought Fannie was like that. She could murder him. They haven't an idea in common. They'd like to down each other."

"And they each think they're absolutely right."

"I think Fannie will kill Mr. Reid if he carries it out."

"They're not so unlike, your sister and my friend."

"How can you say a thing like that?"

"There's the sentimental side of Angus. He's conscious of it or he wouldn't repress it so violently. One day it'll come bursting out. I've always told him so. Not being used to liberty it will go mad for a little

while. It's dangerous because it's pent up. There's the practical, logical, materialistic side of your sister. It must be there, or she couldn't run the house as she does. She suppresses that, she has to, even more than Angus has to suppress the romantic and sentimental side of his nature, because if she let it free she couldn't go on. They antagonize each other so frightfully because they attack the sides of the nature they keep down and ignore as far as possible."

She said very simply:

"You're very clever, aren't you? You see things. Mr. Reid. . . . (I shall have to get used to calling you Mr. de Bouton when we're alone) Mr. Reid says you'll write a great book one day. He says the critics say you have done so."

"I never wanted to so much as I want to at this minute."

They were so young, the world was so young, and young stars roofed them in, twinkled at them through the branches. They moved off the high road; a dear little mysterious wood shut them in like a secret house, only the rustle of their feet in last year's leaves broke the stillness that seemed like a benison.

"You're on our side," she said.

He said: "I know. I've got to go away, you know. It wouldn't be fair on Angus. I was non-partisan. Now I am in armour. I carry the colours of the house of O'Rane. I've got to go away. It wouldn't be fair on old Angus. I've gone over to the other side. I shall hate to go away. I shall hate to leave the fight, but I can't fight against my friend. I entered the enemy's country as his bodyguard."

He saw the oval of her little face, the darkness where here eyes shone. He said again:

"I shall hate to go away, Miss Kane, but it's the only thing to do. I can't take open sides against my friend."

She said, "No, of course not."

They found a brook. By day it was a common domestic little thing, chattering over old sardine cans and jam pots, but by night it was a thing of silver mystery, one visioned it running glinting and glistening and murmuring wistfully to the wideness and oblivion of the sea, not resting finally and ignobly in a soak-away full of rank watercress and rubbish.

Bobbie found a seat for her, a natural armchair out of the stump of a tree.

"Best ivy brocade," he said, "made before the war. Won't you try it, madam?"

She was awfully quiet, listening to the little chattering brook, her hands clasped round her knee.

"Mr. Angus Reid will stay," she said at last.

"He has promised your sister to stay till the end of the month and take no action."

"What will he say when you go?"

"It'll seem like desertion."

"And it'll only make him more determined and pig-headed."

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, dear!—it'll work against us."

"I'm afraid it will."

"Need you go?" she said. "Need you go? Can't you stay on and be neutral?"

"I'm not neutral any more. It wouldn't be honest.

It wouldn't be straight. I'd be acting a part. I couldn't do that and carry the O'Rane colours as I mean to carry them. I've been friends with Reid all my life. I admire him. He's white, he's sterling, but I've formed a new allegiance and I've got to tell him. I'll hate like hell to do it. We've been through things together, the same school, the same battalion . . . everything. He's been more than a brother. We've never seen eye to eye, but it's been a sort of bond not to, an amusement, a diversion, until this. I shall tell him when I get back to-night."

"So soon?"

"The sooner the better. Almost as soon as I came into the house I broke away from him. I see that now."

"He'll be so angry and hurt; and a man like that—it'll please his vanity to carry on in what he considers the right path with the world and his best friend against him. He's keen on what he calls his 'duty.' Do you really feel you must tell him? It'll strengthen his hand so."

"I'm afraid so."

"What made you take the O'Rane colours?"

"One day I'd like to tell you."

She sprung to her feet then. She said in a quick, hurrying voice:

"We must get on."

A breeze rose with her and rushed along beside them through the wood. It had broken into their privacy. They seemed companioned by it and no longer alone; but at the edge of the wood it left them and they heard it fluttering back. They walked between hedges again.

The stars above them seemed brighter and more curious than the quiet eyes that had glimmered at them through the leaves of the little wood. A moon shone in the primrose sky, pale and new.

"I wish you weren't so young," he said; "so dreadfully, beautifully, wonderfully young."

She did not ask him why. She just said, "I don't feel so young," in a quiet, sober little voice.

She was frightened by her unfamiliarity to herself. She seemed to be standing listening, waiting, watching for something that did not come, but only raised a queer, delicious little shiver of expectation that was half fear. She had passed out of the school-room into the anteroom. She knew that.

They found a little public-house. "A Handful of Flowers" it was called. There was a garden lying beside it like a strip of embroidery. It was queer, incongruous, like a panel of exquisite colouring on a housemaid's afternoon black.

They could have cold ham and tomatoes and bread and cheese and tea out there on a little table.

They sat there and ate their meal in silence. The blank wall of the inn mothered them; a high hedge shut them in disquietingly. In the untidy beds tobacco plants and roses, sweet williams and carnations made an intoxicating bouquet.

It was like a secret communion, vivid with the awful sweetness and excitement of their secret thoughts and their hidden wishes that were not hidden.

"It isn't hot here," she said.

"It will be hot going back."

Commonplaces they ran up between each other like black curtains to hide shiningness.

"If Guardian is very angry shall I see you again?"

"See me again?"

The curtain was up. It was gone for ever. The blank wall of the house crept nearer.

"Well, shall I?"

"You must know," he said. "You couldn't sit there not knowing, not feeling it; no woman could."

She knew then she was out of the anteroom. It was like playing a game she had played before.

"Feeling what?" she said.

"That I love you," he said. "Ever since the first moment, Kane—before then. I know you're young, but I'll wait for you. No! I won't wait for you! Kane darling . . . darling Kane."

Everything shining! the stars, their eyes, her tears, his laughter. . . .

"I never thought it was like this!"

"It will always be like this, my sweet."

III

They had a compartment to themselves going home. They sat, hands clasped, staring out at the splutters of yellow in the greyness outside the windows.

Their love dipped and wheeled and soared in their minds like a bird in the sunshine, only now and then alighting on rear earth, and then instantly uneasy and off again.

"It's going to be awfully difficult," ventured Kane.

"I know."

"Difficult for Fannie."

"And for Angus."

"And for us."

Then they were off again, skimming into the future impatiently, and back into the past, in the new glad realm of their love.

"I'm under age. He might make us wait two years."

She put her little brown hand on his. "Bobbie, you won't make him angry?"

"Of course I won't, darling. Besides, Angus and I understand each other. I tell you he's one of the very best, the very, very best. Of course it's obvious that I shall have to go away. I can't stay on at the house, but I shall come and see you every day."

"But you won't make him angry, Bobbie dear. He and Fannie . . . well, it's in the atmosphere. We don't want them up against each other over us. They enjoy the jousting. I don't want to be jousting over."

"What an absurd darling you are. You're making an ogre out of a perfectly good fellow, just because he and your sister have been used to ruling the roost unquestioned and don't hit it. They're both rather tyrants."

"You don't realize the feeling there is between them."

"Their pride is up in arms."

"More, much more than that. It's deeper. He's stirred something in Fannie, something I never knew was there. I've always thought Fannie was exquisitely controlled, balanced, logical. Angus Reid gets under

that, and through it, or something. She's different the moment he comes into the room."

They found a taxi. For them it was a little dark, secret room where they could speak and listen blessedly and be alone. A little blind, dark, secret room with the world going blindly by all wrapped in darkness or bathed in sudden stinging yellow light that rushed into the box so that they suddenly saw each other, before it rushed out again.

"What was the world before you came?" he said.

"It was no world at all," she answered humbly. "Simply no world at all."

IV

As Angus helped Marjorie Moneypenny wash up he talked and she listened.

They worked surrounded by little and big labour-saving gadgets which Mrs. Moneypenny, trailing round ideal home exhibitions, had acquired at various times. Most of them had never been used since the first demonstration, some were rotting, corroding, and tarnishing gently from neglect and old age.

Now and again Mrs. Moneypenny blew in and out, making brittle, silly, little remarks that broke off after the first few words and became a complaint. Angus brushed her away mentally without effort; he was used to brushing elderly females out of his consciousness.

"Would you have the ceiling white-washed before the next girl comes in? Do you think it needs it,

Angus? I'm sure I try and make everything nice every time."

"By Jove! Marjorie," Angus said, "it's something to talk to an ordinary level-headed woman again. I'm fed up on the artistic temperament."

"Is this Fannie O'Rane pretty?"

"I don't know."

"You must know, Angus. A man generally does."

She turned and looked at him. Her hair was very gilt indeed under the unshaded downpour of the scullery light; her eyes were very blue.

"It isn't the sort of good looks I care for. She's got the sort of face that is out of place at breakfast."

"Unusual?"

"I suppose so. She irritates me, so I don't stop to analyse her looks."

"I've never known you like this about anyone. I mean generally you're so detached."

"I'm detached now, I think, but I hate inaction. For a whole month I've got to mark time—and the result will be the same at the end as if I'd acted straight away, and all that time lost."

"How has Mr. de Bouton taken it?"

"Like a duck to water. He pals with the whole shoot. I've an idea he thinks . . ." He paused. "After all, if you're going to put emotion in the place of common sense every time . . ."

"Oh, well, he's half French. They're not dependable. I never did like Bobbie Buttons; he's got a way of laughing at one. One doesn't like it."

"He's a fine little chap really, Marjorie. I think the world of old Bobbie. Of course he's a romantic,

but then those writing fellows never are on the level with themselves; they're always scurry-funging in the undergrowth. They suffer, you know, up and down. He's like that." He paused. "It's frightfully restful here. If you don't mind I'll come up quite a lot this month."

"You know we like to have you."

"I'll get awfully pugnacious living among enemies. It does get your back up."

"I am quite sure it would."

"I'm not going to give in."

"It wouldn't be you if you did. They'll thank you in the end. I'll do the salad bowl. It needs a dry cloth."

Mrs. Moneypenny blew in.

"Marjorie, one of the apostle spoons is broken; snapped right off. Would you put them away?"

"Yes, I think I should; they're tiresome to clean and we never use them."

"Dear, dear! I might as well sell my pretty things. If one has nothing to clean I suppose one can get cleaners. I don't think I will put them away. Why should I? Yes, I suppose I'd better."

"What will you do with the little woman who plays?" she queried, when her mother had departed.

"I know two aldermen who have influence at a home for old ladies in Surrey. I shall get her in there. It's a charity organization."

"She ought to be grateful."

"It isn't an attitude of mind they're capable of."

"What is Kane like?"

"Pretty in a gipsy sort of way. No strength of

character. One sees in the O'Ranes why we've had so much trouble with the Irish. It's the old story, hatred of discipline."

"Judy?"

"I don't see much of her. Pretty, quite a kid."

"The boy?"

"Wild, but clever; astonishing knowledge of the classics and of literature; that's due to that Cole man. He'd get in anywhere on the classical side. Personally I'd rather see a boy keen on games and arithmetic than anything; it's more normal."

"Of course it is. I shall be glad when you're out of it all."

"By Jove! so shall I."

"It would have been so easy to let them go their own way."

"For some men, yes."

"I should be awfully firm."

"I shall merely carry out my original intentions."

She said: "If I were Fannie O'Rane I'd welcome it. Women aren't really fitted for responsibility. It's awfully difficult. I like definite people. People who deal with every day as it comes, you know. It makes the day after much easier." She hung the towel up and wiped her hands on the roller towel. He felt a glow of gratitude for her. She made him feel so masculine, so sane, so sure. He felt like a landsman who is again on land, grateful for solidity and immovability he had merely accepted before.

"You're awfully understanding," he submitted.

She did not stir him as Fannie O'Rane did; she soothed, she almost cosseted him.

He had a sudden cinematographic vision of marriage with Marjorie Moneypenny; a place for everything and everything in its place. Well, he liked that. He hated hunting about. He felt oddly defiant. Defiant of what? He did not really know. His was the attitude of a thwarted little boy. "I'll show 'em." Show whom? He did not know. He was only curious of the attitude tingling and pricking within him, making him oddly uncomfortable and unfamiliar to himself.

He thought of Fannie O'Rane, the cool, remote smile that never reached her eyes, but left them grey and contemptuous.

v

He was still in a queer, worked-up mood when he got back to the O'Rane household.

The little Punchinello butler said:

"Miss Fannie said would you please go to her den, sir?"

It made his mood suddenly concrete; vague petulance became aggression.

"It's past eleven," he mentioned.

"I know, sir, but Miss Fannie said I was to tell you the moment you arrived and take up some coffee."

He shrugged; he was aware that it was not in the best possible taste, that shrug.

They were laughing and talking when he entered, Bobbie Buttons, Kane and Fannie. Fannie was gentler than he had ever seen her, gayer. Happiness radiated from them all.

He said: "You wished to see me?" It was prim and priggish, and he knew it, and the queer, disconcerting silence that fell registered his impression; it was the painful suspension of enjoyment, the self-consciousness that a grown-up's entrance into a childish game will sometimes produce.

Kane stood up and said, "You see . . ." and then stopped with her hands tight clasped and looked at Bobbie.

They were so gay, so young, so radiant. That was the word . . . radiance. There was something about little Bobbie Buttons, his absurd snub-nose, his twinkling, vivid eyes, something near the thing men called nobility. He was ennobled, that was it.

He was aware of a queer feeling. He knew what it was. Jealousy, childish, illogical jealousy. He was like the thin, long, little boy in spectacles who is not allowed to play games. He was out of the picture.

"Kane and Bobbie want to be engaged," Fannie said.

"They haven't known each other a week."

He had an angry, baulked desire to participate in the vividness, the colour, the joy, the tremendous zest they seemed to get out of life. He felt lonely with an angry, helpless loneliness.

"We're sure," said Kane; her voice lilted, it broke on a half laugh.

"Sure of what?" he persisted.

"Everything," said Kane comprehensively.

Angus turned to Bobbie. His voice was curt.

"You must be mad."

"If I am, I like it."

He had it too, that air of carnival, of gay, breathless jousting with life. The whole air was electric with happiness, excitement.

"Look here," said Bobbie. "I meant to shut up, to be reasonable and wait. Then out of a clear sky . . . you know how it is."

"No," said Angus stubbornly, "I don't know how it is . . . I only know Kane is too young to know her own mind and you're too impulsive to know yours. Love is as much a question of suitability, of mutual interests . . . What on earth can you know about each other!"

Fannie said: "You're not going to take it like this, Mr. Reid? They're happy. You can see they're happy."

Kane's brown eyes flashed. She said: "You're stuffy, you're just stuffy! A week ago you weren't in our lives."

"And neither was Mr. de Bouton," he reminded her. "What's the matter with you all? Are you incapable of seeing to-morrow? Is life nothing but an illogical yielding to illogical impulse? What can you know of each other? What can you know of life, Kane, cooped up here? You can have no judgment. You've had no opportunity to form one. The thing is absurd . . . as absurd as those two children who ran away to Gretna Green in Dickens' story. When you know more of life and you've had occasion to form your own judgments."

Bobbie grinned. He was absurdly friendly, elated, impervious to offence and common sense alike.

"I'm sorry, old chap," he said, "I've enlisted under the O'Rane banner . . . that's the long and short of it. I came here really for a lark, an experience . . . and it turned out differently. One can't know things beforehand. It doesn't seem fair on you, but there are things out of our control."

"It is convenient to believe so," said Angus.

He was hurt, unbearably hurt. He was being deserted. It had been a queer, long, warm friendship his and Bobbie's. It had given him a queer parental pleasure to control the latter's many whimsies, to keep his phantasy pruned; and in return Bobbie had sometimes given him tantalizing visions of a land of romance from which he seemed temperamentally debarred.

"They want to marry," Fannie said.

"Not until she attains her majority," said Angus.

"She must go abroad and see the world a bit."

They stared at him. Fannie enigmatically. Kane tearfully. Robert de Bouton with growing resentment.

"I wouldn't be doing my duty by you if I gave my consent to anything so preposterous as a marriage between strangers and one of them a mere child. I'll talk to you upstairs, Bobbie."

"You won't. We'll settle this thing here and now, Angus. I love Kane. She's your ward. She is under age. I want to marry her. I am content to wait . . ."

"I won't be sent away," said Kane. "I won't go."

Then Angus grew cold and quiet. He was to stand

quite alone then. Well, he'd always been alone as far as he could remember. People who did their duty were generally alone. Suddenly he wanted their sympathy, their understanding.

"Look here," he said, almost boyishly. "I took this job on, I've got to see it through. I've got to be true to myself. I can't let you marry Bobbie, Kane, until you know more of life. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair on you. Happy marriage isn't an affair of romance and sentiment. Marriage goes on after the honeymoon. I want you to go abroad for a year, travel, meet people. Be sensible. You're so young, so unprepared for life. I know you think I'm a prig and a fool, but I can't go against my own judgment. Kane, your father trusted me to help you avoid such a mistake as your up-bringing forces you to make. He put me in a position of tremendous trust and responsibility. Should I be true to it if I let you marry a man I introduced into your home? Marry him in utter ignorance, on a wave of impulse! Go away for a year. It isn't long. If you feel the same when you come back you can marry each other. I withdraw all opposition. Why, child, you haven't known any men."

"And I don't want to."

"You see how immature your whole attitude is! Marriage is something more than an adventure, it's a contract."

"I put my cards on the table," Robert de Bouton said. "You force me to. I disapprove of the way you are conducting the whole trusteeship. I consider the attitude you've taken up from the first wholly

lacking in kindness, imagination and even humanity. I'm going to clear out, but I'm going to have my say before I go. You're inhuman. You're going to turn all these poor souls out of this house, to take away the only thing they've got left in life . . . their last shred of faith in human nature. You may be able to legislate and direct, but you don't understand things. You haven't a spark of imagination in your whole body! You've never lived and you don't understand other people wanting to live. You're making a ghastly mess of things."

"I'm sorry, Bobbie, I can't see what purpose is served by all these personalities."

"I'm coming to see Kane every day," Bobbie burst out.

"You're not!"

"The house is mine," said Fannie.

They were all white, all angry. Their voices sounded high, unnatural, like quarrelling birds. The very air seemed suddenly detranquillized, full of furious, bustling agitation.

"Naturally, Miss O'Rane, if that is your attitude . . ."

"It is," she said.

He felt oddly stimulated and excited, but his voice was level.

"It seems there is nothing more to be said. I have no intention of letting my ward marry until she comes of age. You merely strengthen me in my original resolves and demonstrate their wisdom. I introduce an impulsive philanderer into the house . . ."

"Oh!" cried Kane sharply.

"See here!" said Angus curtly, "there isn't anyone in this house who tolerates my point of view or acknowledges that I have an objective other than of sheer priggishness and spite and a desire to butt in. Your attitude has forced me to be aggressive. If you were all going to die this year I'd say 'Go on,' but you've probably all got long lives in front of you, and you do nothing to prepare for them. I've promised to stay my hand for three more weeks and five days. I'll do it and I'll stay in this house passively even if you make my life a misery. For three weeks and five days there is nothing to stop you seeing Kane every day, Bobbie. Miss O'Rane gives you permission. At the end of that time I intend to send Kane abroad with a charming family I have found, three months in Paris, then Spain, Italy and the East. If she comes back in the same mind about you it will at least be a mind able to sum things up and weigh them. I shall feel satisfied that I have done my duty. I don't forbid you to write to each other. I am entirely reasonable. I merely demand reason from you."

"I'll not go," said Kane. "I'll not be dictated to."

"You've got to learn discipline." His voice was suddenly wistful. "It isn't I who teach it to you, it's life. Oh! try and take the long view, Kane; you've got to know the road before you decide on it, and you can't know it at nineteen and living the sheltered, fantastic life you have. I must do what I feel, I know, is right."

Bobbie Buttons turned to Fannie.

"May I take Kane to Kew to-morrow, Fannie?"

"You may," said Fannie O'Rane.

Angus walked to the window and stood staring down at Papa Pip's garden dreaming in the moonlight. He felt old and even a little dry and withered. He saw himself aridly with their eyes . . . just a tiresome, stuffy prig. They had no ballast these people. Will-o'-the-wisps floating through the days, charming, impractical, but gay with a gaiety he envied, young with the youth that had somehow passed him by. It could never catch up with him. He could never catch up with it.

Their voices crisped behind him, shutting him out.

VI

He found letters in his room. From his mother, his mother's bailiff, one from an aunt, his aunt's broker, two from tenants on the estate. They were all a little querulous and helpless and petty.

He gave them careful, patient attention. He dealt with them honestly and painstakingly after due consideration. To his mother he wrote kindly and affectionately, ignoring her peevishness, buoying her up, encouraging her. She was not to worry. He would deal with everything; and he would have a talk with the cook when he came down; he was quite sure it could all be put right.

It was early morning when he had finished.

He went to the window and looked out.

It would be so much easier and pleasanter to give in and let them all go their own way. He felt tired and somehow vaguely tempted. It was dull keeping on

keeping on and being disliked for it. Doing one's duty was lonely work.

The sun came tripping in golden slippers among Papa Pip's flowers—reds and blues and oranges and mauves leapt and quivered under his eyes. It was rather a wonderful world. He brooded over it while it shimmered under his eyes in a scintillating diamond mesh of dew. Perhaps there were things in it he'd never dreamt of—things that had natural homes in men's hearts, gay things, solemn things, wonderful things.

He saw them suddenly in Fannie O'Rane's hands, withheld from him. She ran with him through the sunlight over Papa Pip's flowers, she held them up and mocked him. He wanted them. He wanted them from Fannie O'Rane.

He was subconsciously aware that he was in love with Fannie O'Rane. It came with a shock, oddly unpleasant and disconcerting. It was an odd discovery, almost a sensation. He had held love in his heart as a blind man might hold a bird in his hand, aware only of the fluttering. . . . Now he saw and the fluttering became merely incidental.

His startled mind anchored on to Marjorie Money-penny. He lifted her into his consciousness hopefully, but it was like darkening a light when he had hoped and believed it would lighten a darkness. It served only to add to his bewilderment.

Chapter IV.

I

FOR Kane and Bobbie the days sped winged with happiness and wonder, full charged with novelty.

And Kane said, nestling or challenging, brilliantly brown and red, glowing with her love:

“Oh! Bobbie . . . there’s the end of the month. How will it end?”

And Bobbie said:

“I shall get you in the end as I was meant to in the beginning, you very beautiful and priceless little blessing.”

A wall of misunderstanding had fallen between him and Angus Reid; their movements were obscure to each other, their mental processes suddenly foreign. Their old, long enduring friendship had gone as completely as if one of them had died; there was no further mental interchange. It had vanished. They spoke to each other civilly, they smiled like well-bred strangers who make way for each other.

So Bobbie came every day for his love and took her out into an enchanted world that stayed with them whether they themselves went or stayed.

They went in trains that became golden coaches, into country that might have been furnished with green fields and moon daisies especially for their coming;

the world draped itself into an exquisite background against which they were merely conscious of others' movements and their own, and the coming and going of kindly shadows that broke for a minute into their enchantment. These shadows wished them well, there was wistful benison in their eyes. The shadow Miss Proctor played for them. They sat in the dark in the long drawing-room and her music flowed over their hearts like promises and pledges. They sat in Papa Rip's garden among his flowers, and the gnarled hands of the shadow Papa Pip trembled as he planted tiny things in soil he crumbled patiently between his fingers and mixed with lime and silver sand. Sometimes a leaf fluttered down, a flower fell; he looked at the dahlia buds. He had seen many autumns come and go. He would have fended it off and kept them there and his flowers and the sun for ever. Sometimes the little shadow poet Cole read to them in his sad, beautiful little voice and they listened like people who leave the door of Heaven a little ajar that they may hear plaints of the earthbound. The love he read of in his sad, sweet little voice was like a secret sacred possession. They caught each other's eyes and seemed to lift it shiningly, exultantly.

Everyone round them lovingly preserved the moments of that wondrous month until for them it took on the semblance of eternity and their imagination could see no break in its shiningness.

Gladys, the vicar's wife, was thrilled at the news of their engagement. She clasped her little work-roughened, blue-veined hands, and her eyes shone with starved hunger.

"Oh! Kane, you'll have a real wedding!"

"How do you mean?"

"A veil and bridesmaids and everything."

"I hadn't thought," said Kane. "Yes, I suppose so."

"When people are married," said Gladys, "you know, well-known people, I always read those bits in the papers, their gold trains and everything. I see them, I do really; you know what I mean!"

"You poor little thing," Kane said impulsively.

"It always seems to me so funny," said the vicar's wife. "To the people who can have the clothes it doesn't mean anything; you know what I mean."

She was a funny little wraith, a ghost thing with pathetic blue-ringed eyes. She rose at four in the morning to do her work. She never complained. Her smile was wan but it persisted.

"They send me summer sale catalogues," Gladys said. "I choose the dresses . . . just like a silly kid with a toy-shop catalogue. It's very petty, but it keeps me happy. I don't feel very well these days."

"I wish you could get a decent living," Kane said.

"I wouldn't change for anything. Philip's so awfully happy. He doesn't miss things. He's just happy. Any woman who lived with Philip would have secret sidetracks in her mind, sometimes I tell myself that. Mine doesn't hurt, just an awful longing for pretty things that I can't conquer. Philip's got God and he's got me. You know what I mean. He lives between us. I'm not like that. I think it's best if you can share your littleness and your envies with your husband. Philip hasn't got any. He doesn't like to think I have.

I hate being dowdy and feeling dowdy. It's like a degradation. I can't explain what I mean. I can't explain"

"I think I understand," said Kane.

To Bobbie Bouton she explained: "She's such a little brick, really, Bobbie . . . with just that weakness. I'm not sure it isn't a particularly concentrated love of beauty. Life means something to her. I went with her once to a dress show. She didn't want the things. It wasn't envy, it was sheer adoration. She sat awfully quiet and pale, and I felt as if she were listening to music I couldn't hear. They had black curtains and that new daylight light, and every now and then she said, 'How lovely! How lovely!' or 'Philip *would* like me in that.' It's as if she can't realize herself except through her clothes. Do you think she's pretty?"

"It's a brittle sort of prettiness."

"I think if she could talk about her clothes-hunger to Philip it would be easier. It just hurts Philip, he can't get her the things. He sits and looks grieved. He can't see she's expressing some need in herself, a sort of hunger she doesn't really expect to have satisfied but it helps her to talk about. She's so plucky. She works like a nigger. She fainted twice the other morning over her washing, but she wouldn't tell Philip or anyone, only Fannie found her sitting down and looking queer and got the truth out of her. Philip adores her, but he feels religious about her, even at breakfast. She's . . . up there. She does try so hard to live up there where he's put her. Of course, it's selfish of Philip really; she satisfies the need in him to worship. You won't do that to me, Bobbie . . . put me

up there where I daren't stretch and have a temper unless I tumble out of the unnatural place you've made for me in your heart."

"I promise you shall have all the tempers you want."

"I think it's better to start on the level in married life, be what you are."

"It's never been done," smiled Bobbie. "It can't be done. You aren't what you are when you're in love."

She smiled. She put her little brown hand on his knee. He covered it with his own and waited.

"Bobbie, what a lot of unhappy people there are in the world!"

"We only think that when we're very happy ourselves, dear."

"Your friend Angus, for instance."

"Oh, I don't know. Angus's got a line and he beats it out."

"He's beginning to suspect it isn't the only line."

"Then he'll beat it all the harder and straighter. That's Angus."

"There's Fannie, all walled in because she thinks she ought to be. They're both lonely and isolated by a sense of duty."

"They've both had heavy responsibilities too early. They both repress their temperaments; self-discipline."

"What's this Moneypenny girl like. The one in Hampstead that he goes to see?"

"Hearty and healthy and concrete. She likes things and people nice and clean. She'd suit any man who lived the average unthinking life between the office and the home. She's a very nice girl, but I don't like

her. She believes *The Times* is better than *The Mail* because it's twopence, and British meat is better than foreign because it's British."

"Isn't she right?"

"Nearly always. She's full of popular prejudices, and they're the most difficult thing in the world to disprove because everyone is on her side."

"Is Angus Reid going to marry her?"

"I used to think so."

"You think he has altered."

"Of course."

"Do you think what I think?"

"You'll have to tell me what you think."

"Of course it sounds absurd when almost everything they say and do is up against each other . . . but I've sometimes thought that he and Fannie . . ."

"It has occurred to me," said Bobbie.

* * * * *

II

So Angus Reid lived alone in a house full of people, as folks do every day and no one suspecting it, and sometimes not even they themselves.

And Angus knew suddenly and inexplicably that he had been lonely all his life and was lonely now, and his loneliness instead of being mere comfortable growing room became unfurnished space that irked him.

The exchange of current prejudices that pass for opinions is easy and entirely painless; you receive something so absolutely similar in return that you are only

conscious of the giving, but the exchange of new ideas is an entirely different proposition. You pass over something you never realized the value of until you hear it derided and wish to snatch it back, or you hold out something so foreign that there is nothing to exchange and you are left with an idea on your hands, as it were.

That was what happened between Angus and Marjorie. He had never needed her so much. They let each other down and were mutually unfair to each other. He demanded things outside her limitations because he himself had passed outside them. She could deal efficiently with anything concrete, but he developed a baffling way of talking in the abstract. She had an irritating way of pulling him up as a grown-up will pull up a child in the middle of a delicious, enjoyable fairy story. "But it couldn't happen to us, Angus," and "But I don't see what it's got to do with us," and "Let's wait till it comes," or "It doesn't concern us."

At the sentimental asylum in Soho, people were always ready to sort out your funny, bumbling new ideas, to help you unpack them, as it were, and they passed over their own, clumsy, real things, oddly fashioned, not polished things of familiar, uniform pattern like Marjorie's ideas.

"But don't you understand," he cried. "I'm only supposing."

"You never used to suppose," said Marjorie. "I don't see what good it does. When a thing comes along deal with it."

"But it's interesting."

"I think it's a waste of time."

"There are other things in life than the things you read in the morning's newspaper."

"People who get on in life haven't time to bother about them."

"You're so sure," he protested. "So sure of everything. Life's so big."

"But you're only asked to live in a corner of it, Angus." She was knitting a white jumper under the trees in the garden. Her square, capable hands moved quickly.

"I can't make you out, Angus," she paused. "I like a man to have ideas and stick to them. That's what I like about you. You never altered. Lately, they've got loose. I simply can't make you out. I should say, if I didn't know otherwise, that something's got hold of you."

He had a will-o'-the-wisp vision of Fannie O'Rane. She shimmered beyond his common sense, and until lately he had not known there *was* anything beyond his common sense.

"I'm not myself," he said. It was an unconscious plea for understanding.

"Are you ever going to speak to that wretched Robert de Bouton again?"

"Of course."

"I'm not!"

He looked at her in surprise. Her mouth, her eyes had gone hard.

"But he's in love," he said; "I mean you've only got to see them together. When a man's in love . . . I mean like that."

She was staring at him. He had been idly fishing

in his own mind. He was embarrassed by his catch because she saw it. He tried to throw it carelessly back.

“They say when a man’s in love . . .”

“He went there as your friend and at the end of a week he rounds on you. Why can’t you see things straight, Angus? He’s a sentimental deserter, but that doesn’t alter his desertion. I simply don’t understand you these days, you’re so . . . muddled.”

III

Everyone was out. Down in the kitchen the little Punchinello man and his minions worked invisible and unheard. The rest of the house was dead.

Angus had spent the week-end at his mother’s. There had been much to do, more to listen to. He tried to ease his mind on her. She was piqued and peevish at his preoccupation with the O’Rane household. She presented a stiff little front, behind which she sulked and protested and suspected.

It dawned on Angus for the first time, as it has dawned on millions of other only sons, that he had hopelessly spoilt his mother.

“It’s the O’Rane girl,” she said. “You can’t tell me!”

She was outraged, more like a mistress than a mother. Her eyes were like his, deep brown, but they seemed to have grown moist with old age like licked brandy-balls. They disconcerted him.

“If it’s any satisfaction to you to know it,” he said,

"we hate each other, we're barely civil. I'm having a thin time."

"You chose it," she said. "Will you bring her here to live? Of course it's your place."

He tried to be gentle, patient. "Don't be silly, little mother. You *are* being silly, you know."

She tried to be omniscient, that last card the aged play.

"You can't fool me, Angus. I haven't been in the world for seventy years for nothing. I can see things. I know. A young man doesn't turn himself inside out from a sense of duty. I should like to see her."

"My dear mother, you're completely off the lines."

"You wouldn't get angry if there wasn't something in it."

Clearly no ease was to be obtained there.

He came back to an empty house possessed of a new and devastating unrest. His mental world was in chaos; his thoughts prowled carelessly; they were no longer useful missionaries: they had become insatiable tourists."

"Everyone out?" he asked the Punchinello.

"Master Pat's about somewhere, sir, or he was."

"Everyone well?"

"Everyone, sir."

He would have kept him but he did not know what else to say.

"All right. I'll find Master Pat."

"I think he's up in one of the attics, sir."

How the sunlight twinkled in the quiet rooms of the old house, creeping through half-drawn blinds, making little stinging pools of colour in unexpected

places. The rooms seemed graciously resting, there was something stately in their spaciousness. They were like polite old people who slept surreptitiously when they were alone and woke to vivid, sympathetic life when people returned to them. They did not wake for him. Only for the O'Ranes they woke and identified themselves with the genial, happy atmosphere. For him they remained as impersonal as a museum, as dead. He knocked at the door of Fannie O'Rane's study and peeped in because he knew she was not there. It gave him an odd feeling, bitter-sweet. There she sat, and wrote and thought and planned. This was her little throne-room, her audience chamber. He saw her, withdrawn from them all, a secret from them all, a gentle, beautiful, baffling enigma.

He closed the door very gently. It seemed to him this little room smiled in its sleep.

He made his tour of the attics slowly. They fascinated him. By a man's house shall you know what he is, but by his attic shall you know what he was: there the phases he has outgrown linger on in dust and twilight; there in odd corners lie the perfume of his childhood and the odd, awkward ghosts of his youth. In the drawing-room, in the office, in the smoking-room you shall see the fruit ripen, but up in the attics are perishing the roots by which such splendour grew; the little clockwork model that was the seed of an ultimate career, the doll that was the awakener of an eternal instinct, the old fancy dress that stimulated an enduring vanity. A house where a family has been reared grows downwards. Its roots are at the top; thence they spread downwards, through the first "room

all to myself," to "breakfast with mother and daddy," right down to the dining-room and "dining with the others," and on into the street, the world, and so over the hills and far away. That is why mothers, even old mothers whose children have passed the hills and reached the far away, spring-clean upwards and not downwards. They know they will not see the end of things and that they have lost the beginnings; but the ghosts of the beginnings are up there waiting for them. It is nearly always the time to shut the house up for the summer holiday before Mary and the "char" have reached the attics even with the bravest mothers.

It was really Fannie that Angus was trying to find in the attics with the little dusty windows that framed big pieces of a sun-gilded city. He was trying to discover the little girl who had grown up at twelve and become a mother to her own father. He did not think of himself as the little boy who had grown up a little later and become a father to his mother. He did not see it that way. He did not know he was subconsciously seeking a lost youth, or signs of it. He did not find Fannie in the attics. He found Kane and Judy in dolls and dolls' houses on which the dust lay thick as fur, in old photographs of Owen Nares, in albums of picture post-cards, in knitted reins of rainbow wool, in a doll's cooking stove red with rust. He found Pat in a broken box kite and an old fort, in an ancient bus conductor's outfit. He found signs of Mr. O'Rane's restless flitting from country to country in search of forgetfulness, an Italian sash, a cheap copy of an Andrea Delambia, an Etruscan vase, odds and ends of pottery and embroidery, a man-

doline, a guitar, a zither, a Blick typewriter, a child's chair.

He opened the door of the last attic and found Pat.

There was a little platform under the high barred windows, and the boy sat there reading, cross-legged, absorbed. Beside him a little cupboard, with the dusty door open and a shining key in it, showed two rows of books.

They were all school stories: "The Hill," "The Brothers," "Stalky and Co.," "The Loom of Youth"—books by Mais, by Walpole; stories of boys' schools.

Angus Reid said frightfully quietly:

"I didn't know you wanted to go that badly, Pat."

Pat shut the cupboard-door, he locked it, put the key in his pocket and kept his hand there; then he suddenly realized the inadequacy of it, the thoroughness of his betrayal.

"It's the cricket chiefly," he said.

The wind puffed the curtains; the curtains puffed out a jet of silvery dust which danced in on the sunlight.

Angus Reid came and sat on the platform and lit a pipe slowly and in silence. He knew that Pat had been delivered out of Fannie's hands into his. He knew that he ought to be glad.

"It's the cricket with a lot of boys," he said.

"And the other fellows."

"Yes, and the other fellows."

"Did you go to a public school?"

"Only for a while. My mother wanted me back. I've always been sorry." He paused. "We'll have a talk to your sister."

"No!" said Pat.

Angus looked at him; the boy was loutish with his years, not his temperament. He was unhappy, not actively, but in nagging little festering ways he was unhappy and unfulfilled.

"She doesn't want me to go to school and I told her I didn't want to. It's all for one and one for all in this house . . . it has to be. We're peculiar people."

"And you don't like it?"

"I don't like it, but I don't see anything else for it. It's all right as long as we keep with peculiar people, I suppose."

Angus puffed at his pipe. He was no longer alone. One of the O'Rane's army was creeping furtively to his side. He felt oddly sorry, almost ashamed. He would have liked to see them united and unconquered. This thing was happening without Fannie's knowledge by a mere trick of mood and moment. It was the first break in the ranks.

"It's more comfortable to be ordinary," said Pat. "You mustn't think I'm against Fannie. Fannie's simply top-hole. Father was against school for boys. I see why. Fannie doesn't; she merely carries out his wishes. With father it was selfishness."

"Why?"

"He knew if I went to a public school I wouldn't fit in here afterwards. I had some of these books when he was alive. There's an old man, a bookseller Mr. Cole goes to for translations and things; he tells me when there's a good school story out and I buy it. I've got 'The Way of Revelation' here. I bought that

last. I wouldn't talk like a boy if it wasn't for these. I don't know anything about boys."

Angus looked at him. He was vivid, like all the O'Ranes, a touch of red in his hair and skin.

"So you sacrificed yourself to preserve an unbroken front."

"I couldn't let on, if that's what you mean," said Pat. "And I'm not going to let on now." He looked at Angus sharply. "This is a talk between men?"

"Surely," said Angus.

"One can't go back on women."

"One can't," said Angus. "Which school shall we send you to?"

"You mean to!"

"I always meant to, Pat. I thought that was understood."

"I know," said Pat breathlessly. "But one couldn't knuckle under when all the others were fighting."

A queer little smile touched Angus's lips. In his world of new values one touched victory and it became defeat.

"I don't know why your sister should know you're a renegade," he said slowly. "Why not put the onus of it all on me . . . the common enemy."

"Ought I to?"

"I think so, old chap," he pulled at his pipe ruminatingly. "I quite think so. You see, if you go up and say, 'This chap Reid was right all the time; I want to go to school,' you'll merely be humiliating her and proving me right."

"She does hate you!"

"I believe you're right."

"I don't know that Fannie is like anyone else."

"I don't know that she is, Pat."

They began to talk of schools, of games, of books, of a hundred and one things.

The sunlight crept out of the attic; they were there in the greyness with yesterday's toys and to-morrow's thoughts. The boy was flushed, eager, excited; his hopes and dreams tumbled over each other as fast as they came.

Then suddenly the door opened and Fannie stood there.

"They told me you were up here, Pat," she said.

The light died out of Pat's face and out of hers; they both wore the same look of startled bleakness.

"I fear I interrupted a propaganda meeting," said Fannie O'Rane icily.

IV

He told Marjorie Money Penny about Pat.

They sat in the dining-room because it rained and the drawing-room ceiling had been distempered. There was a smell of size and late dinner greens.

"Well, that's splendid! Of course, you went and told Miss O'Rane."

"No, I didn't. I couldn't really. It wouldn't have been fair on the boy or on her."

"Rubbish! You're out to down her, aren't you?"

Was he? His thoughts paused in their idle running and looked back. Incredibly ugly the whole idea looked expressed in Marjorie's terse way. His imagination flamed up and etched Fannie O'Rane. He saw

her with emotional intensity, the leader, an absurdly gallant figure, valiant with absurd valiancy, and the O'Rane army behind her deserting and she not knowing.

"And Judy wants to be a children's nurse," he said. "She came to me this morning when Fannie was out. She'd been battling with her conscience. I promised to get her into the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children later if I could. They love Miss O'Rane and they want to be loyal, but there's the lure of their own desires; it's very natural."

"It seems to me everything's twisting round your way. You've only got to dispose of the old people."

"There's something mean about this . . . the secret deserting in the night, and yet it's only mean if she gets to know of it. Of course the ethics of it are all wrong."

"Who cares about ethics, even if they know what they are? It's results that matter. I don't know what you want to be so chivalrous for, Angus. She'd like to see you beaten if she got the chance. She's working for it."

"Yes, I know."

"She's spoilt."

"Yes, I know."

"I should think she's a hateful type, the type that wants taking down a peg or two," she glanced at him. "She can't be nice anyway. How was your mother?"

"Difficult," he frowned a little. "Possessive."

"I suppose it was the O'Ranes?"

"How did you guess?"

Again the smell of size and cabbage water; and the bright blue boring of Marjorie's eyes.

"Well, it's only natural. They have rather eaten into you, you know. You're quite different."

"I don't see it. My interest is . . . executive."

"Did your mother think that?"

"Oh! Mother!" he shrugged.

He felt her nodding wisely to herself even though she never moved.

"How is the clergyman's wife who is so crazy about clothes?"

"She's there every day. There's something nice about her . . . like an eager, rather crushed child."

"She doesn't sound to me at all a suitable person for a clergyman's wife."

"He adores her."

"That may be."

Funny he'd never noticed how Marjorie bit her words off. It was the sort of voice that sounded well on the telephone. Now he felt shut in with it in too small a space, that was the feeling.

"I shall be glad when it's all over. I suppose it's worry, but you're not yourself, and I dare say your mother noticed that. You're not so—so . . . clear-cut."

"So cock-sure, you mean."

"I liked you cock-sure as you call it. One knew where one was. You don't even sit still in the way you used to. I mean you fidget."

"You'll say, like de Bouton, that the O'Ranes have magiced me."

"I shouldn't say anything so silly."

Did men alter suddenly, get whisked away from the old roads and the old friends? He wondered. He thought of Robert de Bouton's extravagant gesture the first time they had seen the O'Rane house together, his laughing prophecy, "This is where Marjorie Moneypenny dwindles until she is no bigger than an incident."

It dawned on him with a start that she had dwindled and she was dwindling. Because he was lonely he made a hasty snatch at what was left.

"Tell me what you've been doing."

"You aren't interested and you don't listen any more. I don't know what you come here for."

"I come here because I am lonely."

"But you're enjoying it."

He knew that was true. His loneliest moments were his fullest because Fannie peopled them.

He rose to his feet. She rose to hers.

"I wish," she said, "you wouldn't go on staying there."

"I gave my word."

"Fannie O'Rane's getting round you."

"My dear girl, we never speak."

"She wouldn't make you happy, a girl with funny ideas. You're a conventionalist, Angus."

"You're as absurd as mother!"

He stopped, annoyed with himself; he could feel her nodding to herself again, although she never moved.

"I thought that was what your mother thought," she said.

v

The walls were red distemper, the carpet was another red, the tablecloth was another red. It was a hot room to look at, a roast beef and Christmas pudding room. Outside it was eighty in the shade.

Gladys Kerr laid the table at one end. Her husband, Leachman's "The Church's Object Lessons," and "The Personal Life of the Clergy," by Robinson, occupied the other half. Three chairs were filled by large and garish hand-painted posters of gnomes and fairies advertising a sale of work in aid of the fund for a new boiler and church repairs, a dog's basket full of crocheted and knitted doyleys stood on the hearthrug, over the fire-screen were slung pale blue hug-me-tights; and a row of babies' bootikins stood between the Birmingham Benares vases on the mantelpiece.

In the centre of the table were five red roses exquisitely arranged in a plain black bowl. Gladys Kerr's blue eyes rested on them as she went in and out.

"Supper's ready, Philip. I'm afraid the lettuce is not very crisp. I couldn't get down to the market this morning. Mrs. Ferguson wanted me to help her finish off her kewpies. As a matter of fact she hadn't started them. I don't know that they'll sell. They aren't useful. I wish we could afford to furnish the little room, dear; then I shouldn't have to interrupt you for meals."

"We'll be able to one day, little woman."

"You look worried, Philip."

"I am a bit. That fellow Saunders has broken out

again. Bates came and told me. I went round at once. Saunders was out and Mrs. Saunders had a cut lip. He came home blind last night. 'Pon my soul, I believe they like the excitement of it, she seemed so pleased. There wasn't a penny in the house. I gave her what I'd got for the kids. I thought I'd got him hoisted on the water waggon for keeps this time. Now we'll have to start all over again."

"It's . . . it's so hopeless, Philip."

"No, it isn't, honey! One gets marvellous results sometimes. It's the feeling of their need for one. It's exciting and thrilling getting hold of them, dragging them up, there's a splendour about it. One can't help a little personal satisfaction. I fight it all I can. You're not eating anything, dearest."

"I'm not hungry, Philip."

"It's the heat. I wish you could get away. There's your people, but I don't see how I can spare you till the sale is over."

"I know; I'm perfectly all right."

"Let me make you a cup of tea?"

"No. No, really."

"You look a regular little fashion-plate to-night, old lady."

"It . . . it was Miss Elder's frock," she said. "When she was turning out for the rummage sale I asked her to give it to me."

"But I thought it was for cushion covers. Surely I heard her say something about it before she left."

"I didn't promise to make cushion covers. It was she who suggested that. It isn't as if she lives near us any more."

"I don't see that that alters things, dear."

"Don't I look nice in it?"

"You look charming."

"It's a very little thing, Philip. She gave me the frock to do what I liked with. She only suggested cushion covers."

"I know."

"You're not cross?"

"I'm not cross, dear. I haven't any right to be cross."

"I think one can be too scrupulous. I'm not a clergyman. I do try to measure up to standard."

"I know you do, dear. Only . . ."

"Only what, Philip?"

"Nothing."

She cleared away very quietly. The charwoman had left the cat's milk in a saucer; when she moved it a blackbeetle ran from underneath like a highly varnished toy.

She went up and lay down in her room. It was hot. The heat seemed to press down from the ceiling in layers. She was so tired; the tiredness stretched achingly to the ends of fingers and toes. Lots of smooth, beautifully written books Philip had, so smooth, so beautiful that they just rolled away from you and left you high and dry where you were. She tried to anchor on to the ideals they expressed and pull herself up by them, above grey silk frocks and things. She tried very, very earnestly, very, very hard. She went in search of God, diffidently because she felt Him to be particularly the friend of Philip and the Parish, but hardly an acquaintance of hers.

What was goodness and how did people grow good? She wished she knew. She would have given worlds to know. Her love for Philip flowered wistfully in her thoughts. She would have liked to have been a great, strong comrade—something like Britannia on the backs of the pennies—and succoured him.

She began to cry very, very quietly; and the tears seemed to roll over her thoughts in some mysterious way and smooth and cool them.

Perhaps it was living in a house one hadn't chosen among things one hadn't chosen that made one try and preserve the little tawdry bits that expressed oneself. It was funny how violently she wished to express herself. It was the only vivid thing about her, like a new bright bit in an old thing.

She wished passionately she was built on the noble scale or that there were directions for the attainment of nobility procurable. She did not find them in the lives of the saints. In those days goodness seemed merely a social attainment.

She had been asleep when Philip came up to her, and the room was dark and blessedly cool.

"Not cross?" she said, just like a child.

"Not cross," he said, just like a father.

"I try to grow like you, Philip."

He laughed with his lips against her fair, lustreless hair.

She folded the silence round her a minute. Through the window she could see the stars. They looked cool, like little diamonds on a blue gown.

"I love you. I love you. I love you. Isn't that enough?"

"I want to be a fine wife."

"You are."

"Philip, I want to be a fine mother."

He looked at her. The stars looked at her; kind little old shining eyes.

For a minute she saw God like a beautiful bird singing in the sunlight. Absurd! Beautiful!

"Do you think I shall grow good?"

She felt his eyes. Wet?

For one minute they clung there in the little rift that lies between to-day and to-morrow; the little refuge that has been made timeless by the worlds' lovers and is the nearest earthly point to Heaven.

Chapter V.

I

AND Fannie who had always been lonely and suspected it, suddenly knew she was lonely.

She came to have the queer, illogical feeling that she had set herself, or had been set, apart.

For the first time it frightened her, scared her oddly; her loneliness became a vague menace, a well-built box from which she sought to free herself by contact with the people around her; and they drove her back on herself, they did not even seem conscious of her desire to establish contact.

She tried Pat, but Pat was curt and evasive. He would not meet her eyes, he held her off with a boy's impregnable brusqueries. He was ill at ease and a little conscience-stricken with her. She made a sudden claim on him as kinsman, and knowing himself a deserter, he was inclined to resent it.

"The end of the month is very near, Pat," she said.

Pictures leapt vividly into his young mind; green grass and boys playing games in white flannels; he heard, like a reassuring promise, the chatter of gay young voices.

"I suppose he's really going to send you to school?"

"Yes, in the September term." He could not help a lilt in his voice.

"Father wouldn't have wished it, that's what worries me."

He wriggled away from her mentally, and the further he wriggled the more clearly he saw her defending a fort no one desired to defend except herself, championing a fantastic cause that no one but herself believed ever ought to have been created. Even to his young, rather hard eyes her position was not without a wistful beauty.

"Oh! Pat, why did he come and break things up?"

The boy had turned stony, his face was a little sullen; he had retreated behind something that was quite new.

"Is he going to carry out his programme . . . just as he said?"

He could not answer that. He would have told her what he saw very clearly indeed, that the curtain had to come down on a fairy-tale that real life might go on. He mumbled something.

"Did you know that he has decided that Judy is to be a hospital nurse . . . a children's nurse?"

He did know, but when she mentioned it like that, he felt a little better. Judy was beside him in his deception. And Kane, too, had been dragged out of the fairy-tale by her heart. Impossible to tell Fannie they were glad to go, add insult to disloyalty. Kinder to let her think her army had merely surrendered to force.

"Oh! how I do dislike him!" said Fannie. "He's so overbearing."

"I don't think he's that. He's got a scheme and he's carried it out. He's been quiet enough about it."

She looked at him. There was a gallantry in her last stand because she did not know it was a last stand and that her forces had broken up behind her.

"When you've all gone I shall keep this place on alone," she said. "I shall offer Papa Pip and Mr. Cole and Miss Proctor my hospitality till . . . till it gives out. He cannot force them to go to his wretched institutions if I offer them a home here. They are free to stay."

"Look here, Fannie," he said. "Look here . . ."

She rose to her feet. Her face was white, bleak. He sensed that she suffered for her fairy-tale and would continue to suffer; with sudden compunction he said:

"Look here, Fannie, it's been no end of fun here and we shall always remember it, but things can't go on. I mean that's common sense."

"Half the brutal, unthinking things in the world are done under the banner of common sense."

They looked at each other. She made a funny little gesture.

"All right, old boy," she said, with a queer little smile. "All right."

Of course she thought he had been got at, he could see that.

It was all right as long as she didn't suspect what he himself had never suspected until the chance had come, that he had been just waiting to go, waiting for the chance to slip into real life.

She spoke to Angus about it.

"I hear that you are sending Pat to Lancing."

"You heard it first of all from me, Miss O'Rane."

She bent her head. Her wiry hair was more a coronet than ever, regal. She held her head up. "Her little Valiancy," Angus called her to himself.

"I do not think the boy wishes to go."

"I do not propose to consult him."

"You are going to adhere to your original programme?"

"I see no reason to alter it."

"You cannot be wrong!"

"I have had no evidence that I am, so far."

"You dispose of us all."

"I do not presume to dispose of you."

"Are you going to tell Papa Pip and all the rest of them you are going to . . . to clear them out."

"At the end of the month."

"I want to be there when you discharge your . . . your pleasant office."

He was frightfully quiet.

"Certainly, Miss O'Rane. I would not have suggested it. It might be painful. I object to your calling it my pleasant office. It is my painful duty. Goo' Lord! d'you think I *like* it?"

"I don't think you mind. It ministers to your perverted sense of duty and discipline."

He sat on the edge of a table. His lean brown hands gripped it on either side of him. His clear brown eyes were intent upon her. She felt him gripping for her mind and imagination. She had a weak moment's desire to surrender it to his clear-cut common sense, to yield up the fret and the pain and the unavailing battle of it to his quiet jurisdiction.

"Look here, Miss Fannie," he said, "I beg you,

for your own peace of mind, to get clear of your sentimental mirage for a moment."

His voice was kind, friendly, strong.

"I am an angel of deliverance," he said, and smiled; "only you can't see it."

She waited. She had a delicate, fascinating way of waiting. It was as if her mind paused on tip-toe ready to run away, just poised for a minute so that he must be quick to catch it or it would be gone.

"The longer the blow was stayed the more unmercifully it would have fallen," he said, "and it would have had to fall. You could not have carried on like this financially for long. It is kinder that the end should come now. There is enough saved to start Pat and Judy out in life, to give you all enough to live on. If the household had gone on as it is now, at the end of a year or two there would have been nothing for any of you, and you would have been a ghastly muck-up, frankly. What will have to come now would have come then, but it would have been more far-reaching and destructive in its effects."

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"I don't think I told you why I wanted to be present at the interview. I am going to offer them my personal hospitality for so long as it will last."

II

"Look here," said Bobbie Buttons. "Frankly, *need* you?"

Tremendously quiet behind his pipe smoke, tre-

mendously grave this Bobbie, and Angus facing him, equally quiet, equally grave behind his cigarette smoke.

"You're misrepresenting yourself, you know, Reid."

"To whom?"

"Everybody."

Wedgewood-blue pipe smoke, blue-white cigarette smoke, all around them the tranquillity of well-used household gods, and their voices coming from behind the smoke, feeling for each other as it were, for old landmarks in their common experience, for an opening back into the careless communion of other days.

"Look here, old chap."

"Are you sure you understand, Bobbie?"

"I don't; frankly, I don't. It seems inhuman to turn all these poor old devils out."

The light fading, and in the drawing-room above Miss Proctor playing soft, kind, gentle music.

"I can't afford to keep them, Bobbie, that's the truth."

Startled silence and the delicate thread of the music weaving itself palely between them, mending rifts as it went, obliterating stains, making the friendship whole as it was before; and the pleasant consciousness of it being made whole.

"Barton and I went into their affairs last week. We were waiting for certain papers from Sumatra of all places. It appears Mr. O'Rane invested money there and left the titles and things in the hands of a Dutch notary. The result was a shock to us both. Fannie has three hundred pounds a year, and the rest have exactly one hundred and fifty pounds a year apiece."

"What are you going to do?"

"You have so often accused me of being a man of one idea, Bobbie, that you should know. I am going to carry out my original intention with regard to the O'Ranes. Kane will go abroad with Professor Fellowes and his wife and daughter for a year, Judy will go to school at Eastbourne until she is old enough for the Great Ormond Street Hospital; Pat will go to Lancing."

"And Fannie?"

"I don't know."

"Of course," said Bobbie, "you've made me feel a damn fool."

Two thinkers behind blue haze.

"Why not let me take Kane off your hands?"

"At the end of a year, Bobbie, I'll be very pleased to be best man. She's such a child, Bobbie. It's the life she's had. Oh! I know your arguments, my friend, I know. I'm sorry I've got the duty bug, old boy. I can't shake it. If I were a self-made man I should slap my chest and say, 'That's *me!*' "

"What if Fannie persists in keeping them here, old Papa Pip, Mr. Cole, Miss Proctor and all?"

"I don't think they'll stay, Bobbie, once I have explained the O'Rane estate cannot run to it. They seem to me to be ladies and gentlemen . . . I use that term without snobbery."

"Will you tell them the truth?"

"Oh, no! I believe we are to have a meeting extraordinary with Miss Fannie as chairman. It will be extremely unpleasant."

"Then she isn't to know?"

"She least of all."

"I said this place would mischief you, my boy, and your Bond Street boots are stuck fast in enchantment. Aren't you taking on rather a lot?"

"Yes," said Angus, "but I like it."

"Wouldn't it be better to tell Fannie?"

"I think not. Miss Fannie will not be dependent on me. She shall have the three hundred. Put the rest down to my terrible mania for organization. It's a form of self-indulgence, as you've often pointed out. Therefore I am merely paying for my pleasures, which everyone does."

"You've altered."

"So Marjorie says," he paused. "By the way, naturally I don't wish Kane to know."

"Very well. What's at the back of it all?"

"A peculiar form of self-indulgence, I suspect."

"You've always been such a concrete person."

"Yes, I know."

"Why not tell Fannie?"

"She wouldn't let me do anything and I couldn't do anything on the three hundred pounds. She can't dislike me more cordially than she does, and it's easier all round if she doesn't know, much easier, easier for the others, too. Gratitude to someone you can't stand is really an unbearable thing to carry round. I lack the courage to inflict it. I imagine anyone of Miss Fannie's temperament would find it pretty intolerable. I'm gratifying my own whim and personal vanity."

"But you know they'll feel pretty poisonous about the old people going, and it will put you in quite a false light."

"There's an awful lot of time wasted in explaining motives. Besides, I'm used to playing a lone hand. There's something that pleases my vanity about it. I'm not even sure I'm not feeding my vanity at their expense."

Bobbie rose and walked the room.

"I seethe with petty suspicion, Angus."

"Of me?"

"Of your motives."

"I think perhaps it were better to let them alone. If you can't have a thing, Bobbie, there's a sort of satisfaction in driving it further and further away."

"Meaning Fannie?"

"You were always an intelligent little boy."

"It's awfully unlike you to evade things."

"Perhaps I never had anything to evade before."

"Did it ever occur to you that Fannie O'Rane is a perfectly ordinary young woman?"

"I shall try and find comfort in the thought when we meet to deal with the pensioners. It will be a ghastly unpleasant affair. I must own I squirm at the contemplation of it. The worst of it is I'm so damn sorry for them myself, the whole bunch."

"Does your mother know of the financial responsibilities you contemplate?"

"I shall have to tell her. She was rather absurd about Miss O'Rane."

"Or discerning?"

"Both."

"And Marjorie?"

"Marjorie regards the O'Ranes as denizens of an-

other world, and takes a naturalist's intelligent and surprised interest in them."

"I see. Look here, Angus, I find it very difficult to pin you down."

"I don't wonder. Half the time I'm not there, not in the places where I could always find myself mentally. I'm constantly trying to pin myself down, or I shall get lost altogether. That's why I've got to see this thing through. It's a bit of pure Reidism, perhaps the last bit of pure Reidism I shall ever put through."

"Look here, Angus, be serious."

"Can't a man be serious unless he's talking commonplaces?"

"If no one knows the truth no one can thank you."

"I don't want expensive thanks. They would cost the O'Ranes dear; more than the courtesy is worth. Look here, old boy, I'm a temperamental legislator with a lovely little game to play all on my own. It tickles my vanity. That expresses it absolutely."

"And the outcome?"

"Again the realization of one's purely personal conception of duty, always very gratifying; at the end of a year Kane will be married to you, at the end of three years Judy will be started in a career of her own, and I shall be free to concentrate my entire financial resources on Pat. The satisfaction of fatherhood without its pangs."

"I wonder if you at all realize the feelings you'll evoke in a temperamental young creature like Fannie O'Rane when you turn those delightful derelicts out."

"I've quite a shrewd estimate, but it is that or

blowing the whole bag of tricks as far as the O'Ranes are concerned. My dear boy, what would an entirely unsophisticated girl of Judy's age and an equally untrained boy of twelve achieve on a hundred and fifty a year? Very much better to let charity surge in unperceived on a wave of particularly virile hate. Better not to let my right hand know what my left hand doeth rather than give the O'Ranes an unforgettable performance of the two of them plunging about for their rescue. It must be horrible to suffer a kind enemy, perfectly horrible."

His friend shot a glance at him. In the half light he was a creature of clearly defined outlines; Bobbie could feel his vivid brown eyes grinning cheerfully in his brown face.

"I suppose you know you're behaving like a bloomin' hero?"

"In the stilly watches of the night I get splendid visions of myself."

"You won't talk seriously to me."

"No, old boy, I won't."

"You won't change your mind about Kane and myself?"

"I won't. I don't expect either of you to thank me, but if I didn't do what my sense of duty absolutely screamed at me to do I might have myself to thank one day; and I should hate that. Things have got a good deal boiled down lately, Bobbie, and I've got to be true to the things that are left or I'll become a pretty non-functioning sort of creature. I've lost my map and obtained a vista. From my point of view it's a very inadequate exchange, because having lived

twenty-six years without a vista I don't know what to do with it now I've got one."

"Look here. Couldn't Kane talk to Fannie about you and find out what she really feels?"

"Miss Fannie herself has left me not the slightest doubt," said Angus dryly. "Not the slightest in the world."

III

"If you could gather them together quietly," said Angus. "If we could make it just a simple explanation of facts. It isn't essential to alarm them one moment before it is necessary."

"You prefer to hit unexpectedly?"

"It is your own method of expressing it, Miss O'Rane."

It is doubtful which of them dreaded the ordeal more; but she was high-keyed to it, overwrought by four weeks' constant play of her vivid imagination on her yet vivider sympathies.

She saw him as a Herod, that was the stark truth; and the protective maternal instinct in her that life had forced and vivified at the expense of other instincts was outraged. He was quiet with a sort of transparent glaze of indifference. It was that apparent indifference which goaded her. It seemed monstrous to all her outraged sensibilities.

They stood together in the drawing-room, that long room that ran the length of the whole house with the window that framed Papa Pip's garden and the window that looked out on the square.

It had been a brassy, unwinking August day; and now the sky was finely drawn like thin dove-grey silk over tarnished gold. The noise of the traffic was like distant tumbrils. Thunder came and went like the breathing of a wheezy giant. The London sparrows skimmed low in the heavy atmosphere like the little top-heavy toy aeroplanes against a faded background.

He would have given anything for a less atmospheric evening; there were unrest and promise of storm in the very air.

"Look here!" he said impulsively. "Need you? Let me see this thing through. It'll hurt. It can't do any good."

She seemed oddly frail, transparent beneath her crown of copper-wire hair. The steady stare of her dark-ringed grey eyes disconcerted him.

"Miss O'Rane," he said earnestly, "I promise to be gentle. This operation has got to be. You can't do any good by being present. You will only infinitely distress yourself."

"You are sending Pat to school against his will. You are sending Judy to school against her will. You are separating Kane against her will," she challenged passionately. "But this thing you shan't do! The others are helpless, but the old people have got me!"

She was quivering with anger, but he could only feel pity. Utter helpless pity and vague dismay.

"Look here!" he said disappointedly. "I beg you! It isn't any good tilting at windmills. Things have to be faced up to. All this fuss isn't only cruelty to yourself, it's cruelty to them, momentarily deferring the inevitable. It's like making people sorry that they've

got to die, desperate because Winter is coming . . . it's all unavailing sorrow and anguish. If you had enough money to keep these three old people until they die, I would say 'God speed'; I would take off my hat to you, I swear it. I would pay you court as a ridiculous and valiant idealist . . . but you aren't; you are a self-deceiver; you don't lack a certain flamboyant, short-sighted courage, but you lack the great essential, the courage to square up to hard facts."

She was white-lipped.

"Is the lecture over?"

He bowed.

"They are in the dining-room," she said. "And I have given instructions for us not to be disturbed."

He put out his hand detainingly. His eyes searched her face.

"Miss O'Rane, I stayed my hand the promised month. Won't you relinquish the unconscious cruelty of your philanthropy?"

"I will not," she said.

He followed her silently, wishing with all his newly awakened imagination that it had been one of those quiet, clear, pearl-coloured nights that are like promises renewed. He felt for Fannie the absurdest, grieving tenderness. It stilled him. It seemed in some mysterious way to give him a sharp, not unpleasant, consciousness of maturity.

The dining-room was full of that pale, copper-coloured storm light. Against it the trees in the square were etched in softest grey stillness. It seemed to hint that some of that same anticipatory soft grey stillness animated the three old people. Were they,

too, aware of storms ahead? They gave him gentle smiles and each smile wrung his heart a little.

"Dears," said Fannie, "Mr. Angus Reid wants to speak to you all."

"Mr. de Bouton, dearie," said Miss Proctor.

"No," said Angus. "My name is Reid."

No dismay in the old, patient eyes, only surprise, flickering quickly like a little brittle fire, dying out.

The crash of traffic in the busy roads set about the dreaming square, like tumbrils; the sulphurous yellow deepening.

"Before he died," said Angus Reid slowly, "Mr. O'Rane nominated me guardian and trustee to his three children who were yet minors, Kane, Judy and Pat."

He paused. The friendliness of their quiet eyes was unbearable; they hurt. Miss Proctor had started her crochet.

"I heard something about this place from the lawyer," he said. "A garbled account. I wanted to judge for myself. I wanted to be, if you will forgive the phrase, a free, unbiassed observer. I wanted to get to the core of it. I knew I should be received as an enemy and suffer an enemy's strict limitations for acquiring knowledge. I conceived the not very original or brilliant idea of changing places with my friend Robert de Bouton. Miss O'Rane knew almost at once, and, of course, Bobbie told Kane. It was at her suggestion I preserved the deception for a month. She wanted me to soak myself in the atmosphere of this place, to lend myself to it before I judged—" he looked at them directly. He looked at Fannie sitting

with her tired eyes closed. "I found it unbelievably beautiful, a fairy-tale come true."

"Yes," said Papa Pip gently; "yes, my dear."

"I am going to tell you right away," he said. "It can't go on. I have been into Mr. O'Rane's financial affairs with the lawyer closely. This is the position. It is your temporary security or the well-being of the young O'Ranes. There isn't enough money for both. There is only enough money left to carry on this place with stringent economies for a year or two, or to educate and keep the young O'Ranes until they are able to battle with life. Certain obvious expectations of Mr. O'Rane's have proved groundless. Until Mr. Barton and I got all his affairs, which were scattered, into our hands, we never realized, what I am quite sure he himself never suspected, that he had been living on capital for years. That capital is irreclaimable. I feel that it is up to us to provide a future for his children with what is left."

He had gripped the arms of his chair so tight that when he laid his hands on his knees again they seemed oddly like swollen wooden toys.

Tumbrils passing. The waiting grey shadows of the trees. The patient waiting grey shadows before him. Their patience wrenched his heart.

Miss Proctor said very gently, with a brave little smile that never slipped, but seemed nailed to her face:

"Of course, the idea! As if old people counted when it came to the young. I mean, as if they did. I can take a little room somewhere and give music lessons. It isn't as if I were even a spinster really. . . . I've enjoyed my bit of mothering. It would be

odd if I couldn't sacrifice for the children. The old don't count when it comes to the young."

"Of course, they don't," said Mr. Cole quietly. "Youth is the only thing that counts. I know lots of doctors and I write very neatly. I shall be able to pick my way splendidly. 'Tisn't many men can say they owe the beginning of their business career to the highest blood-pressure in London," he laughed. "There's my poetry, too." He turned to Papa Pip and Miss Proctor. "Perhaps we can find three rooms together in a boarding house; we've grown to tolerate each other's little weaknesses, and it's little weaknesses that matter at our age. Why, it'll be quite fun . . . pioneering. I've often thought I could write those little leaders. I'm very glad you told us, dear boy, so frankly. None of us would have had anything else. It is an honour, a very great honour, to be able to sacrifice anything . . ." He stopped.

Papa Pip said:

"And there's gardening for me. Just someone to help a bit with the rough work and I can grow anything anywhere. And I shan't be far away, near enough to come and give the garden here a bit of a do. Why! it'll give me a new interest in life; it will really. I was getting set above myself, it was so easy."

Fannie sprang to her feet.

"Oh! my dears," she cried passionately. "Oh! my dear dears, what rubbish you're all talking! What am I going to do without you all, with Pat and Kane and Judy taken from me? Stay with me and we'll share; perhaps it won't be so much we'll have, but we'll be together."

Her face was working, the tears running down her cheeks.

"If Daddy were here! Oh! if Daddy were here. I offer you his home . . . the home he gave you. Your home."

Miss Proctor crossed the room to her and took her hand.

"My dear little girl," she said quietly, "it isn't as if we weren't three able-bodied people well able to look after ourselves and each other. Why, you foolish child, it's never too late to start again. I believe we're all looking forward to it. It's a chance to prove that our dreams aren't really broken. Who knows that I shan't earn enough money to have my audition after all. My dear, this isn't the spirit in which to take it. There's Pat and Judy with all their life before them."

Little Mr. Cole said:

"We have got to stand down, dear child. Don't deny us the pleasure of making it a magnificent *beau geste*. For myself I have been a lazy devil, flitting from poem to poem and from day to day. This has awakened me. Together we three old friends will achieve much. You shall be proud of us."

She quieted then. She stood, hands clasped before her.

"For me this is the end of things. I can't see ahead at all. Early next week Pat goes to school, and Judy, I shall be alone. I beg you to stay with me until I have adjusted myself to the emptiness of life and the changed conditions. I ask it as an act of friendliness."

"You make it hard for us, dear," Papa Pip said.

"We could stay just a fortnight while we are looking about," said Miss Proctor slowly.

"Just a fortnight," echoed Mr. Cole. "You understand, dear child, we are at the age when it becomes so easy to take the easier path, to follow the line of least resistance. We must not be encouraged, we must not encourage ourselves. We must keep braced. Braced," he repeated firmly.

Miss Proctor bent and kissed her.

"I am sure," she said slowly, "I am quite sure this is a hidden blessing," her voice faltered a little. "We have rested a long time, and we were not born to rest."

She went very quickly out of the room, holding her small figure tremendously and ridiculously erect.

Papa Pip went to the window, and leant far out and picked two little rosebuds, one red, one white. He took Fannie's fingers and fastened them round them. He looked into her eyes, smiled radiantly, and hurried quickly and wordlessly away.

Little Mr. Cole said:

"There is romance in all this. Adventure is a state of mind. It is ageless. We have suddenly inherited it, we three fossils. Don't worry about us, rejoice with us." He patted her cheek and left them alone.

Angus Reid looked at her. The flowers drooped in her fingers. Her queer grey eyes were dark with tragedy as if she saw her world disintegrating before her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You won't believe I'm sorry."

She became suddenly aware of pallor and tiredness and kindness. He was shorn of his armour. He was

human; her immediate need for kindness made her afraid of it.

"I hope you are satisfied," she said, just like a child.

"You do yourself an injustice as well as myself," he said.

When she looked for the rosebuds Papa Pip had given her she could only find one.

The other had gone.

IV

She woke suddenly out of a dreamless sleep and saw Pat standing there.

The moonlight striped him like a zebra. His hair was rumped into rough fur.

"Look here, Fannie!" he said. "I couldn't sleep."

She held out her hand. Her voice mothered him warmly.

"You'll like it when you get used to it, boy. All boys do."

"I know," he said. "That's the trouble."

She frowned a little. Her black and silver surroundings seemed unfamiliar; and Pat standing there unfamiliar in his old little-boy dressing gown like a long smoking jacket. She sought her bearings distrustfully.

"Reid's a damn good fellow," said Pat.

"Need we discuss him?"

"That's why I came," said Pat. "I hate hiding behind another fellow's trousers."

"Whose trousers, dear?" said Fannie vaguely.

Her hair was a mantle; out of it looked her little, pale, sleepy face.

"I want to go to school," said Pat. "I've always wanted to go to school."

She sat bolt upright. Landmarks leapt at her, the dressing-table, the wardrobe. She was mistress of her world again.

"Now look here, Pat," she said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Simply this," said Pat. "That Reid isn't driving Judy and me to school against our will, and we're not a couple of poor little martyrs. We've always been simply crazy to go. We've always wanted to be like other people, and Judy's always been simply mad to nurse kids. You've been taking it out of Reid for sending us, and all the time he's doing for us just what we've never had the pluck to do for ourselves. We're not end grateful to him and I can't bear to see you treating him like mud. I mean I think it's simply rotten. Reid wouldn't let me tell you because he thought it would humiliate and hurt you . . . but I couldn't stick it."

"Very considerate of him."

"There you go! *That's* what I can't stick."

She was frightfully hurt, bewildered.

"I think you're a little out of your depth, Pat. You'd better go back to bed."

They stared at each other. He sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. It was odd that the nearer he came the further he seemed to go away.

"I want to be a chartered accountant," he said.

"There's something about figures, always has been, you know."

She thought of his classical education by Mr. Cole.

"I want to grow up like Angus Reid."

She withdrew her fingers.

"Look here, Fannie," he said. "No fellow likes being odd."

"Odd?"

"Well . . . could I ask a fellow from school back here?"

"I don't see why not."

"Judy and I have seen for a long time; and I believe Kane is beginning to," he had a flash of shrewd insight. "The O'Rane standard isn't a standard at all, Fannie; it's a world within a world. I came here because suddenly it seemed to me it was jolly unfair to treat Reid as an oppressor when he's a . . . liberator. We've all been bilgy to him and he's been topping all through. I mean it was jolly fine of him not wanting you to know we wanted to clear out. I couldn't stick the idea of your taking it out of him after we'd gone."

"I do not propose to hold communications with him after you are gone. He's not my guardian. You'd better go back to bed, Pat. If you had told me you thought our life here peculiar and you wanted to go to school it could have been arranged ages ago. We had ideals here. I thought we stood shoulder to shoulder."

"Look here," he said, "I'm awfully sorry, Fannie. I felt so jolly skunky about the whole business, lumping it on to Reid. I'm awfully sorry, Fannie. You couldn't call me a deserter. I never enlisted. I mean

I was just roped in. I mean one is roped into families. I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say I think it's the best thing that could happen to all of us. We're going to be normal. I mean it's jollier being normal. It wasn't easy coming to your study to talk. I mean you have been sort of head-mistress."

She flinched at that. She saw herself with unbearable clearness legislating, directing.

"You can't expect a fellow to live in a fairy-tale after he knows it's a fairy-tale."

"I don't know where I am," she said piteously, "with anyone. One was so sure of things . . . and now one isn't sure."

Vaguely he sensed her distress. He said clumsily: "It's easier to live like other people. Reid's making that possible."

She cried out in sudden temper and pain combined: "*Will* you leave off quoting him at once!"

He made a clumsy, helpless gesture.

"There you are! The O'Rane attitude! It's hopeless!"

V

She went down to see Judy's school. She would not be petty if she would not be acquiescent.

Pat had gone. A clumsy bear's hug and an exhilarating leap into a taxi and so into a new life. Exit Pat. Oh! she knew that quite well. She never possessed that gift of self-delusion that mitigates the pangs of parents with growing children, that belief in continued mental cuddliness. It was hail and farewell to

the Pat she knew. She was tremendously plucky, almost bracing.

"Good-bye, dearest old thing. Shall I wish you a century the first week?" . . . that was all.

She knew it would be different when he came back, that the familiar aspects of him would have changed and darkened, that she would feel almost apologetic with him for being what she had always been.

It is never the same person who comes back to the same things.

The face of her world was changing.

They talked to her crisply and brightly at Judy's school. It was a crisp and bright morning; the sea was cobalt and whisked egg, the sands were cluttered with people and the band blared. Everybody happy, everybody glad business. There were girls playing tennis on the red rubble courts. There were girls painting in the lovely gardens, painting paper-looking hollyhocks against a red wall. They looked at her vaguely, absorbed. They were all absorbed, in-drawn; they had that look. Soon Judy would wear it. In the blue and white kitchens there were girls making bread and cakes. Beaten in bronze over the blue-tiled fireplaces were mottoes. The place reeked of a sort of hardy, heady "uplift." Here they made a cult of cheery boyishness. Ideals and religion seemed to have a sporting tilt. They talked of the development of individuality, and one saw rows of fearless, hefty, clean-skinned little-boy girls growing into hipless, bobbed-hair career enthusiasts.

She lunched at the headmistress's table. It was on a platform that overlooked the long, oak-panelled room. Babble! babble! babble! and pink poppies in brown

vases on the polished table. Pigtails, pigtails wagging. They talked to her of Rebecca West's new book, of the Wimbledon tournament. They tore ravenously at a subject in a hard bright way, bit it up in little clearly thought-out, analytical sentences.

They frightened her.

To-morrow Judy was to be incorporated with the strange, keen life she saw going on around her. She was glad she had seen it.

Here again she had no illusions. This school would "make over" Judy in pattern with all these other wagging pigtails.

Good-bye, Judy.

When she got home Angus said:

"I hope, I *do* hope you approved."

Impossible to disapprove of anything so sane and healthy and normal.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Quite."

"Miss O'Rane, I'd give anything if you were with me in this," he said wistfully.

Chapter VI

I

THE spirit of the house was gone.

It was no longer a peaceful community; they hung together as individuals, with here and there interludes when a wraith of the old spirit stalked among them.

To Fannie it was like something beautiful broken and stuck carelessly together. Its late beauty was obscured by the obviousness of its destruction.

Papa Pip, Mr. Cole and Miss Proctor were hunting for rooms. They scoured different neighbourhoods, and in the evenings they compared prices.

They did not consult Fannie from obvious feelings of delicacy; they were loth to press upon her their migratory state; they did not even discuss their future with her. Because they felt obliged not to voice their chief preoccupation, a feeling of restraint sprang up between them; they even felt stilted and ill at ease whenever they were with her.

It hurt her unbearably. Like Judy and Pat, they too were keen to pass out, it seemed, to be quit of her love and care and the sanctuary that had been made for them. She tried so hard, so desperately hard to be glad they took it like that. She upbraided herself passionately for self-love and vanity . . . but the sting remained.

They talked to Angus eagerly; she knew that.

His frankness made a bond between them. They respected it and him. He called something into being with each one of them that they had secretly felt the lack of, and they gave him secret thanks.

They no longer needed her, that was the whole thing. Their roads stretched away from her, and they padded softly and cautiously down them lest she should hear their preparations for departure or know that they were going. She did not actually hear them departing, but she knew she was alone. She realized that clearly.

Then one evening, when Angus came in, they told him they had found rooms.

There was the first fire of the year burning in the drawing-room and they were gathered round it, Miss Proctor, Papa Pip, and Little Mr. Cole.

The fire made red flickerings in their faces. They looked like a group of anxious, friendly little gnomes.

"That's splendid!" he congratulated them. "Avaunt! the Future!" He paused, aware of lack of response. "Is anything wrong?"

Papa Pip shook his funny pink head with its absurd fringe of curly silver hair.

"Tom Ripon has come back."

"Who is he?"

"A communist," said Papa Pip, and shut his mouth like a trap.

"Mr. O'Rane took him in when he came out of prison after the war," said Miss Proctor slowly. "It was the only thing I think he ever did that wasn't quite nice, not quite wise. He used to preach in Hyde Park, and they found a lot of pamphlets in his room

trying to make munition makers go on strike. He was quite notorious. A Bolshevik and a conscientious objector, you know. I never thought it was quite wise to let him come here. He was very, very ill. Miss Fannie nursed him."

"He's a human explosive," said little Mr. Cole. "I mistrust him profoundly, profoundly."

Angus sat down and lit a cigarette. Absurd to say he was afraid!

"A nasty young man," said Papa Pip.

"I suppose he was in love with Miss Fannie," said Angus quietly.

Of course he knew! He had a sudden vision of Fannie when one was ill; kind eyes, little hands patting and smoothing, and her voice, clear and kind and mothering. Fannie reading aloud with the sunlight on her hair, Fannie arranging flowers, the kind, gracious offices of the sick-room.

"He took advantage of her womanly sympathy," said Miss Proctor.

"He was mad about her," said little Mr. Cole.

Angus's ordered thoughts broke up in disordered confusion. When he had entered the room they had been in their usual quiet, neat sequence, ready to use and put back; now they tumbled pell-mell, red-hot, pointed, hopeless. He lost himself hopelessly among them, that quiet, cool, administrative self that had always had the useful quality of standing apart. He was hideously frightened, he was angry, he was filled with blind, unreasoning, impotent hate.

"He'll have to clear out," said Angus Reid. "One can't have that sort of swine knocking about."

Papa Pip put his hand on his arm. His old blue eyes were reading. After all, it did not matter. It was there for the world to read, ineffaceable.

"Quietly does it, son," he said. "Quietly does it. Fannie's not a girl to be driven, and this Ripon fellow's not a fool. He's got a way with him, my son, a way with him."

"He's changed since he was here last," said Miss Proctor.

"Some fool left him all his money," said little Mr. Cole. "Some fool old lady. He's rich. He is respectable. He's trying to reconcile his old theories with his new possessions and finds it a hard job. He's come back to Fannie to help him. He's clever enough to claim only service. She never could deny that. It's the great heart of her. Before there was his health to mend, now there's his conscience. He's got his right of entry as he had before . . . he's in trouble."

The war of his thoughts went on. He was oddly enough among them, being pummelled, hot and angry and totally unfamiliar to himself.

"The police hate him," said little Papa Pip. "When he came out of prison, it got out he'd found sanctuary here, and there was a hostile demonstration outside. The police had to disperse them, but they didn't hurry. He was frightened. He had whisky-and-soda after whisky-and-soda."

"It was a horrid time," said little Mr. Cole.

"He's a snob really," said the little poet unexpectedly. "He's one of those that revile the things they secretly long to possess. I found that out. He's smug too, a Philistine."

"He sounds an unpleasant fellow."

"A dangerous fellow," said Papa Pip.

"I'll have to clear him out."

"I wouldn't do that," said the little poet. "It'll give him fighting-ground. He wants that. Don't give it to him. He's a megalomaniac."

"A mego—what?" said Miss Proctor.

"I mean," said the little poet quietly, "he must express himself in terms of violence because it's the only means open to him. He hasn't culture or money or position or caste. He hadn't in the old days. He's ego-centric. All things revolve round himself. He lives in the limelight. He's the stuff of which martyrs were made in the old days. He must express himself violently to feel that he even exists."

"A dangerous customer," said Papa Pip.

"He ought to go to Russia," Miss Proctor's gentle, worried voice broke in. "They're more used to his sort there."

"We'll send him somehow," Angus reassured her.

She shook her head. "You won't if he means to stay, Mr. Reid."

"He'll soon grasp the fact," said Mr. Cole, "that you and Fannie don't see alike, and he'll work on it. It's just the sort of situation he'd revel in. Don't give him the satisfaction. I don't suppose he'd ever met a decent girl like Fannie on terms of intimacy before he came here. It appealed to the snob in him. I came across him one day gloating over the history of the house of O'Rane. You know that big green book. Of course he sneered. He had to. It was part of his social make-up. I knew; it was a sort of sick envy. If he hadn't been downtrodden himself he

would have trodden down mercilessly. You know the type, but clever, Reid, and cunning, and a way with him. He used to talk to her. He's got a history like a realist's novel, a struggle up from the slums. He's made her cry . . . stories of the kids, you know. He wants Fannie."

"He *wants* her?" repeated Angus.

They looked at him.

"Why, my dear, of course," said Miss Proctor gently, "that's what he's come back for."

II

They saw each other like shadows in the limpid increep of the evening light, like clear soft water it brushed between them, separating them.

Fannie let down her wiry, stivery, copper-coloured hair and began to brush it with slow swishing sounds.

"I feel we're not parting right," said Kane. "I feel it and I can't express it."

It's because we oughtn't to *be* parting," said Fannie. "And *you* oughtn't to be parting, you and Bobbie . . ."

"I don't know," Kane objected.

"You don't *know*. What *do* you mean? You love Bobbie?"

"That's it," agreed Kane thoughtfully. "There's a sort of joy in proving what you know, just to yourself, there's a joy in it." She sat forward on the little chair and gripped her hands. "Oh! Fannie, I want to talk to you."

"I'm listening," said Fannie.

That was it! She was there listening. Funny how difficult it was to talk when people were expressly listening, to catch the shine and glitter and dance of one's thoughts and pin them down in words.

"You see . . ." began Kane, and suddenly she broke off. "Oh! Fannie, if you were only in love too, it would be so easy . . . so much easier."

Fanny almost caught her breath; here was another one scurrying away, crying that there was nothing to catch hold of when the whole of her was passionately outstretched to them, quivering for mental contact. She had a moment of nervous panic; she must catch this little sister quickly, quickly before she followed Judy and Pat and the pensioners into the unknowable.

"You're being sent away from Bobbie to-morrow for a whole year," she said incredulously. "You won't see him for a year. You can't be glad, Kane!"

"It hurts like hell," hesitated Kane, "but underneath there's something . . . something that isn't sorry. I've been so close to Bobbie ever since I've known him that I haven't had time to be with myself and see how I am taking it all. In love you lose yourself, and then after you come back to yourself and find you haven't altered as you believed and trusted, you've just gone dead. You believed you blended just because you didn't count with yourself, and then you come to and find you count frightfully and you've lost the right to."

"But when you love a person you want to be with them always and always."

"Oh, no!" said Kane, "Oh, no! Oh, no!"

"Then I don't understand," said Fannie.

The silence between them grew like a barrier being slowly built by malicious hands. Their process of thought became more and more obscure to each other, soon it would be quite invisible.

"I love Bobbie." Kane was quiet. "I shall always love him. That's knowledge, not just belief, but I want to be set on my feet and find him and myself. I want to think quietly. You don't think when you're in love. I've talked it out with Bobbie. He agrees that Angus is right to insist on separation. We have the inner vision, but Angus has the clear, ordinary outside vision of us and we shall come back to that. Love is made up of two things, the things that you yourself know and the things that other people see. When you've been together long enough to get used to it you begin to be conscious of the outside vision and the things that other people see. You must have seen yourself first and you must get away from the person you love to do that."

"So you want to get away from Bobbie?"

"I want to get by myself and see Bobbie. Bobbie and I have talked things out. He's going to work like a nigger while I'm away, and I am going to try and develop, broaden out. I am going to acquire a jumping-off ground for life."

"Your life here hasn't provided one?"

"Oh, no, Fannie! How could it? It's been beautiful and picturesque and fantastic and . . . and sweet."

There it was again; that air of gentle, loving, tolerant indulgence towards a child's fairy-tale. It hurt! It hurt unbearably. Impossible to sit quietly and be

stung by it. She began to plait her hair for want of something to do.

"So I'm glad I'm going," said Kane with a half-sigh. She rose, then sat down again.

"Fannie, when I'm gone you're not going to let Tom Ripon stay on. He isn't ill now and he isn't even poor, and he's rather a horrid creature. He was always rather horrid in his fiery days, but now he's been damped down by money he's horrid. Angus Reid loathes him."

"I'm afraid I don't find that a sufficient reason for turning him out."

"I wish you wouldn't take that attitude."

"What attitude?"

"That attitude towards Angus Reid."

In the almost-darkness Kane could hear Fannie slipping out of her clothes, slipping into her dressing-gown. Her voice, seeming to flower stiffly upwards as she hunted for her bedroom slippers, was cold and tranquil.

"You have all enthusiastically accepted the lives and careers Angus Reid has planned for you. I have not. You have gone your ways without consulting me in the least. Please leave me alone in mine. I don't understand any of you."

"But you must know that Angus is crazy about you. You must know he's in love with you."

There was a new emotion in the room. Kane could feel it. She knew in the silence that it was there and she had brought it there and they were no longer alone. She strained her imagination to get vision of it. It bumbled there between them, a weighty, homeless

thing that had just been born of her impulsive words. She was nervous of it.

"You are absurd," Fannie said.

She sat on the edge of the bed with her feet dangling.

"Is Bobbie going to see you off to-morrow?"

"Everyone is . . . Mr. Reid, Miss Proctor, Papa Pip, everyone. Fannie, are you?"

"No, dear, I'm not."

"But Fannie, I want you," the tears came; they were sisters; the mental atmosphere between them became hot, overcrowded, stifling with emotional memories. They sought and clutched each other's hands like little children.

"I don't want to go like this." Kane sobbed like a little girl. "I do love you all . . . I do."

Fannie stroked her hair. Once more her voice gentled and mothered.

"Dear, I shall say good-bye to you here. I'm giving you up in my mind, like a mother, to new thoughts and new things and new ways. I wish you well, dear. I think perhaps you're right; you see farther, straighter. You're young to marry, and as you say, you haven't any experience. I couldn't have chosen anyone nicer than Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes and their daughter. I think they're delightful people. I mean it. I feel gratitude to Mr. Reid for them. I do really. I'm glad for you to go, but I don't want to see you off. Dear, I shall be so out of the picture. I want Bobbie to come and see me often. I've given you up to him, that makes a bond. I like Bobbie, an awfully gallant little gentleman. We shall miss you horribly."

"And, Fannie, you'll send that horrid man away?"

"He's not horrid, Kane, only dreadfully unhappy, and he's going soon. He can't reconcile six thousand pounds a year with his conscience, and he hasn't the courage to give it up. He's made a virtue and a career of poverty and down-troddenness and now he's been robbed of it. I'm sorry for him. He really suffers, Kane. The spleen and hatred of the upper classes he lived on was really a secret, hidden passion for power and respectability and esteem from his fellow men. He doesn't know what to do."

"I'll bet he doesn't give up the six thousand pounds. Do you know what he's become, Fannie? A creepy, crawly, toading little snob, a grinder of the face of the poor."

"I know he's terribly mixed in his feelings. We have long, long talks. He can't compromise, that's his trouble. I wish you'd try and think kindly of him, Kane; he really suffers."

When her sister had gone, Fannie lay very still; then suddenly she smiled ingratiatingly, invitingly into the darkness; and the bumbling new idea crept nearer and nearer until it was upon her and she caught her breath oddly, and laughed.

III

There was Autumn outside and rain, and inside the wet stuffiness that is broken up with cold miserable draughts.

The house was tremendously quiet. It held that odd quiet perpetually now, as if someone had just gone who would be missed to-morrow.

They had all departed to see Kane off except Fannie. She had been firm, composed, smiling. "Good-bye, honey, and God bless you, and have a lovely time;" an intentional and determined glossing over of the real significance of the break, its finality.

Funny how quiet made one listen. One could be quieter and more isolated in a noise sometimes. Queer how the old business of life had segregated her in the past and now the slowing up had invaded everything. The natural hush became unnatural, making her restless as if with the consciousness of something repressed.

She was glad to see Tom Ripon, glad of the smell of his expensive cigarette.

"Beastly day," he said.

They stared together at the fine rain. The flowers in Papa Pip's garden were heavy with it, against the trees it made a slanted wire mesh.

"You keep thinking the sun will come out," he said, "and it doesn't."

"It will," she said with an effort. It was like keeping a ball up when you were very, very tired. They tossed words meaninglessly at one another, backwards and forwards.

He was long and lean, with eyes like burnt holes in a blanket. He spoke with a restless hunger. In some queer way he suggested a man who continually stretches out and is continually thwarted.

"Kane gone?" he said.

"Yes."

"There's something of the stoic about you," he submitted. "Something of the stoic."

"You know"—the confidence was suddenly squeezed

out of her for no reason at all; she watched it with a queer outraged feeling as if he had robbed her of it. "You know, things aren't the same with Kane and Judy and all of them: we don't understand each other any more."

He rose and drummed his fingers on the glass with his back to her.

"That's it," he said. "You go on or they go on . . . nothing lasts, nothing. That's what gets you, the ghastly impermanency of human relationship . . . the going on. We call it by great echoing, heart-warming names, this age-old pathetic effort to cling on 'marriage, the blood tie, friendship'—it is the unquenchable desire to feel real—static for a moment."

"I'd rather you didn't . . ." she pleaded. "Not this morning when one is rather . . ."

"One always is," he said. "But one doesn't always realize it, Fannie."

Silence and slanting rain and the faint-coloured glitter of her little ornaments, her little orange bowls and purple vases, and that queer feeling of being somehow caged beside his cage, and his hungry, rather pathetic outreaching to her.

"They'll never come back," she said.

"No one ever does," he was sombre. "It's only just got you, this consciousness of eternal loneliness, but I was born with it and born with the eternal, haunting desire to break it too."

"But one day you'll marry."

He looked at her with his sudden attractive smile, he was an oddly narrow, pointed fellow, the jaw, the straight nose, the tips of his ears.

"The devices and desires of our own hearts," he quoted suddenly. "It's all in that, the unrest and misery of the world . . . 'we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.' D'you see what I mean, Fannie? Psycho-analysts meddle and muck with the seedlings, but the root of it all is there in the Bible and the prayer book, big and ugly and imperishable and world-old. If I could lose this miserable muddle that is me in something or somebody! In my heart I know I could find permanence in ultra-respectability and convention, in snobbishness. All the violence of my socialism was merely thwarted greed and need of those things in a sense. Yet I have seen the other side and the pictures abide with me. I have warred with that side against the things I wanted and the section of society with which I yearned to be incorporated . . . and so the war goes on in me."

"Yes, I know."

"I ought to give this money up," he said. "Yet I gained the ideas that prompt this in a cause that I championed solely because of my conscious hunger for money. I cannot give up a thing and then go on fighting happily because I have not got it."

"No, you can't," she said.

"My whole nature is passionately middle-class," he said. "That's the truth of it; and when they kicked me out because of my coat, just like a little boy, I turned and spat at them. I made a business of spitting. I found other spitters. I placed myself at their head, I made a virtue of spitting. They would not say, all those respectable, established people, 'Here comes our

friend Tom Ripon,' so they should say, 'Here comes our enemy.' Recognition at all costs."

"I think you are too hard on yourself."

"Funny," he said. "All my dreams ever since I can remember in those horrible flats in Long Acre, all my life, have been of possession. Not the gold coach nor the V. C.; possession of things men took for granted. As I denied and violated them they grew, as I thrust them away they crept closer. Visiting cards, properly engraved visiting cards, the sort you leave on people, 'Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ripon' and then 'Mrs. Ripon'—you know. I've wanted to see them and have someone leaving them about, maids taking them on silver salvers. I'm always seeing it . . . like a girl who can sing a bit hears herself sing to a great audience, or feels a fellow kiss her. Petty, isn't it? A fellow, bitten by bugs and dreaming of engraved visiting cards!"

"They were representative," she suggested.

"Another thing," he said. "I wanted a baby in a large white pram and a nurse in white piqué, an expensive nurse from an institution. They've got up and gone away when I've sat down on the same seat in the Park."

Mental desolation gripped Fannie. She felt life flatten out round her, become suddenly horizonless . . . and their two cages were set alone in the flatness side by side, hers and Tom Ripon's.

He looked at Fannie and he saw Fannie through the room, as it were. The room was her incense, her atmosphere. They made of her in his eyes less a woman than a suddenly vouchsafed attainment. The

soft femininity of the little white and green room, the refinement that made it an Eldorado. And the rain outside helped, the rain that seemed to shut him in with her in the warmth and the cosiness and the indefinable state of well-being and comfort. What he had sought was here cradled in this little room.

He looked at her and he saw that she was fine and dainty, and her little nails were pink and polished and her hair had sheen. Next to her skin were soft, fine clothes, and it had never known anything else. He thought of this without a vestige of coarseness or passion, but with the utmost pleasure, as if they were jewels on an idol. He thought of the women he had known and never loved, the women who had revolted him by their very approachableness, whose lack of reserve had seemed to his fastidiousness disgusting license; they lumbered through his memory an ugly humiliating procession.

He fixed his eyes on the books; they were old French authors, old French poets, and the sagas of Galsworthy. His imagination knew them, they crept from their covers, Watteau figures, panniered; ruffled gallants; and the slow moving mellowness of Galsworthy . . . life delicately coloured, purged, silted, a life of niceness, of refinement, that was what the whole room promised him, that lay waiting, like a hidden jewel, behind the reserve, the tranquility, of Fannie.

She was gazing out of the window, and her big grey eyes were unfurnished. She was apparently neither listening, watching, nor thinking. She appeared to hang there for him, a suddenly priceless embellishment to his life.

So utterly, so restful a lady she was . . . that was his thought.

In his mind for one breathless moment he caught her up, he waved her exultantly in the face of all those uglies who had peopled his past.

He walked to the window and stood staring out at the sodden garden, and said clearly and slowly above the frantic beating of his heart:

"One thinks of those poor old devils this coming winter."

"Please!" she protested. "Please!"

She would take it like an aristocrat, the pictures he knew his words etched for her, hunger and cold for the beloved old. He, at her age, would have been blown into fatuous, blasphemous blustering at the mention of it, striving thus to beat down the sense of his own utter impotence. That was his way, to rage against the inevitable.

"They're no damn good those old people, and that fellow Reid knows it," he said. "They'll go under. They've got rooms and enough money between them to pay the rent for a week. Did you know?"

"No," she said. "They didn't tell me."

She was pale, bleak, withdrawn from him.

"You ought to do something, Fannie," he said.

"What can I do? I have begged. I have implored them to stay. I told you how he talked to them. I told you." He knew she had much more to say, then her words suddenly fell down into a hopeless, bottomless silence. He did not break it, he let it lengthen and gloom over.

"Do you think it doesn't hurt? Do you think it

doesn't keep me awake at night? Do you think I don't know that it's like sending out a bunch of helpless babies to fend for themselves? Mr. Reid has made their departure an . . . an affair of honour, a challenge that they simply had to accept. The moment we get any real cold weather Miss Proctor's asthma will come back. Oh! do you think I don't know?"

"Why won't they stay?"

"Because they know I have only a hundred and fifty a year."

"Is that all?"

"That's all. We've all got a hundred and fifty a year, and the others are using it for . . . for their education."

"You can't blame them."

"I don't blame them—— They shall have what I can spare."

"They won't touch it."

"I shall let this house furnished."

"And if the children want to come back?"

"They won't want to come back."

He said: "You see things clearly, Fannie, the writing on the wall."

"Once you see it you've seen it; you know what I mean, Tom; curtains aren't any good. It's there all the time, behind."

"You can't ask young people to live in a fairy-tale."

"Unless it's their own, and then they live in it and shut you out." There was no resentment in her voice, only a dull acquiescence to an accepted fact.

"Suppose," he said, very quietly, "you could keep

them all on here in peace and comfort, Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and little Mr. Cole?"

"Liberty is heady stuff," she said vaguely. "I've seen that this month. That is what it is to them, Tom—liberty."

"When they had a little of it."

"I know, but then it's too late."

"Suppose you were able to stand ready?"

"What is the good of supposing, Tom, it only hurts. Do you think I haven't supposed and supposed? The early hours of the morning are the worst for that, I've found out."

"Wait, I'm coming to it."

He stared out of the window, and the wind veered suddenly and blew the rain towards him. It became connected in his brain with the chill of his old outcast life, trying to touch his new security and promise.

"If I could spend my money like that," he said aloud, "I wouldn't feel a renegade. It would end that absurd war between my knowledge of life and my dreams of it. I could reconcile my conscience with my possessions."

He stared out at the rain and the Autumn, and became increasingly, exultantly conscious of the warmth, the refinement, the peaceful security behind him. It became for him a warming glow to which he could turn any moment; he delayed solely that he might enjoy the consciousness of deliberate protraction.

"You see," he said, "both they and I are at your mercy. We crave your charity . . . both they and I."

She saw dimly then, and grew frightened like a

child who wakes in the dark. He did not speak of her. He was clever there. He spoke only of himself, so that her mind turned from scared contemplation of herself to him, and he was able to reassure her.

"It is difficult to make you understand the war in me," he said. "I know the poverty and the gall and the suffering, I have been in it and of it, and while I succoured it, I hated and despised it, while I chained my body most violently to it my mind was planning ways of escape. I fought for freedom because the sufferings of my body were bound up in theirs, my deprivations were theirs. I fought for the poor only because their poverty angered me because it was also mine. If I had been rich it would never have touched me, I knew that. My trouble is that I've wanted to be a good fellow with other fellows. The top class cast me out because I didn't come up to social and financial standards. I tried to climb by reading and by night schools. You know the story, Fannie. My insufferable conceit won't let me be happy, or even restful, unless I feel a good fellow. Now this money and my previous educational efforts have placed me in the top class—and I am disqualified for good fellowship with the lower . . . I become a traitor. If you will let me spend some of my money securing these people I can reconcile my conscience with my success. You're not understanding."

"Yes," said Fannie, "I'm understanding."

"Save us," he said. "Those old people and myself. Our salvation is in your hands."

She was frightfully quiet, her eyes, her hands, her voice. She did not pretend to misunderstand.

"You're asking me to marry you, Tom?"

"I'm asking you to marry me. With my six thousand a year we'll make a home here for the old people. Incorporate me in your life, Fannie."

"I know," she said, "but one doesn't, Tom, one doesn't incorporate. That's it. If it were only incorporation."

"But there's no need to alter anything, and they won't feel any compunction about staying on."

"But you and I will be altered . . . and can we alter towards each other? Oh! do you know what I mean?"

"All my life I've wanted to be like you, Fannie. How many men can free themselves from masculine convention sufficiently to say to their women . . . make me like yourself?"

"I don't know," she murmured, "I don't know. I'm sure I don't know."

She had a feeling that Angus Reid was knocking at a door and she was keeping him out and wanting him in, that was it. Her thoughts flew like startled birds bewildering her.

Adroitly Tom Ripon steered her away from themselves. The coolness of his eye, the schooled coolness of his voice made the discussion almost impersonal.

"All your life you have been a refuge," he smiled. "It's become a habit with you. We find our happiness in our habits after a time."

"Yes," she said, "I know. I know."

Skimming thoughts, wheeling thoughts, and limping, low flying thoughts like wounded birds . . . and the invisible beater—Angus Reid. She knew he was at the back of them all, that they flew because he

beat them up. It made her suddenly angry, suddenly afraid.

"Take me," he said. "I'm so tired of myself."

He knelt down beside her. He was like a tired little boy who had been ill; listless and weak somehow. He looked up at her with his odd, bright eyes.

"I can't promise, Tom," she said. "I don't promise anything. I'll have to think it over."

"It isn't as if you don't know me."

"But I don't, Tom, that's it. A friend and a possible husband . . . they're different."

He was passive, almost apathetic. She could feel him sagging towards her. She could feel her pity projecting to catch him; and yet he was heavy on it.

"It's a way out," he said.

There was cunning behind his apparent simplicity. He knew his Fannie. He challenged her love for the crowd she'd mothered. She lifted some of the cluttering personal issues that she might see the way more clearly in relation to its safety for all those others.

"I'll have to think," she reiterated.

"We're trained to think of love as an instinctive thing," he said. "I don't think it is, unless there's tremendous physical attraction." He brushed that purposely aside, having raised it only in order to brush it aside and with it a certain vague dark questioning in her eyes. He saw them lighten. "We have a mutual mission," he said, "that should breed companionship and affection. Things may not always go right with Kane and Judy and Pat." Here again he was clever. He sought to nip none of the thoughts he saw growing in her. "They'll get over their prejudice against me,"

he added quietly and reassuringly. "And they can always come home to you."

"I can't. One couldn't, Tom . . . not now. I mean, it's a big thing, marriage."

Odd the feeling that Angus Reid was there and she was talking at him, challenging him. The feeling grew until it became an emotional excitement which she had to control and hide away from the man kneeling before her. He did not seem to matter at all, that was the inexplicable, amazing thing. He was merely the shield behind which she made thrusts at an adversary who was not there. Inexplicable the very riot of stimulation he roused in her. It whirled at the very thought of him; and underneath the heady anger lay something she could not fathom, something she was afraid of because it lived there close at hand and had no name or form, but was just there, neither a promise nor a menace.

"What are you going to do with your life when they all go?"

"I don't know."

He looked at the soft things in the gentle little room, faded some of them, old, even a little prim. He looked at Fannie's instep. It was high. Its height gave him extraordinary pleasure. Somewhere he had read that arched insteps denoted breeding and that water should be able to trickle under them. It all seemed part of a vague, deferred inheritance.

He took her hands and buried his face in them.

Angus Reid, coming to tell Fannie that Kane had gone off happily, found him with his head buried on her lap.

Chapter VII

I

IT was like "nerves," this appalling restlessness that drove Angus out into the chilly streets, into hot cinemas and the cheerful blaring raucousness of music-halls. With him he carried, like a snail its shell, his new-found loneliness and depression.

And this restlessness was companioned by a hot, endless hatred of familiar things. He felt if he could have got far enough away from them, in surroundings sufficiently alien, he could achieve freedom from Fannie and the eternal surmise that obsessed him, but again and again he was driven back to the quiet house in the dreaming square, where Miss Proctor and Papa Pip and the little poet still lingered, with their minds on chintzes and chances and the little nest of rooms they had found.

And Tom Ripon was always there, very, very quiet and grave and steady, eating himself into the atmosphere of the house with little quiet acts and gestures of homeliness and domesticity; not lover-ways to arouse Angus's instant antagonism, but in some subtle manner husband-ways, nothing flauntingly possessive, but rather the air of having possessed for a long time.

And Angus went in to see them, and came away again soon with the nostalgia that he suffered for Fannie enriched and intensified sharply.

He could not keep away, and yet when he was there he could not stay. They had not that warm, voluminous shield against him that lovers use, they did not suggest that definite ensconcing of the newly married; there was something so placid, so gentle-toned in their manner and their ways to each other as to suggest a mellowed, long-established intimacy. This was achieved quite unconsciously by Fannie out of the conscious and never slackened restraint of Tom Ripon; no word, no gesture was ever allowed to escape that should break up the placidity of their camaraderie, the reassuring tranquility of their relationship.

Angus sounded Miss Proctor, alternating daily between the purchase of goldfish or a canary for the communal sitting-room.

"Look here, is there anything between those two?"

"Of course," she said.

"What?"

"An understanding that only he understands."

"You mean he's going to marry her?"

"Without her knowing it."

"Look here, Miss Proctor, that's mad!" He stared at her. "I mean . . . that's rubbish, absolutely bilge; you talk as if he were going to kidnap her."

"He has," said the little lady. "She's drugged, too, drugged by the atmosphere he's deliberately creating. I told you he was clever, long ago. When men are adaptable there is nothing, nothing they cannot do with women. There are so few adaptable men, so few, that women think it is they who have adapted them . . . and that they can go on and on. He never obtrudes himself. He is just there, and she thinks he

will always be just there and she will always be just there. She's building on that; and his whole attitude is an unspoken guarantee that it shall be so. I doubt if he has spoken to her of love, or kissed her; he keeps her lulled by his own impersonality, his unobtrusive helpfulness and sympathy. He hides his own need of her, which would frighten her, beneath the cool mirage of her need for him."

"Can't you help?"

"I can't help, my dear," she said. "Thin spinsters can't help with young girls, that's the truth. They can't believe in them. I don't like Tom Ripon, Angus; I told you long ago I want to get out of the house."

"But you can't leave Fannie in it with him."

"I know. He wouldn't have that. He's a passionate conventionalist. They'll marry very quietly; that's his keynote, quietness."

"Can't you do anything? I mean . . . look here, Miss Proctor, at the back of it there must be some reason."

"If you are feeling forsaken, desperately lonely, misused, as Fannie is, isn't it more reassuring to think there is no reason why you shouldn't marry a man and help him?"

"I believe Fannie thinks you would all stay here if she married him. He has got money."

"We can disabuse her mind very quickly. You can't do anything at all, any step you take will precipitate her into his arms. I think he's waiting for you to take the step. I think he's even counting on you to do so."

"She hates me," he said.

"She thinks she does, that's worse."

They looked at each other.

"You can't do anything," she said. "It's hard, dear boy, but you can't do anything."

He carried his restlessness to Marjorie Money Penny, knitting blue jumpers beside a wood fire. He told her all the news of Kane, of Judy, of Pat, he read her bits of their letters. They were gay letters that brought light to the dark little room and an involuntary smile to his lips.

"Well, they all seem jolly happy," she said cheerfully and prosaically. "It's a good thing."

"You know that Bolshevik chap I told you about," he said slowly, experimentally. "Ripon, Tom Ripon."

She was counting under her breath.

"M', m', m'."

"He wants to marry Fannie O'Rane."

She looked up quickly, then down. It gave him an odd feeling, as if she photographed him off guard.

"Well, things are panning out wonderfully," she said.

"But the man's a swine!" he burst out.

"You're not her guardian, Angus."

"That isn't the point."

He was aware of her healthy gleaming brightness almost like an affront, the gilt of her absurd hair, the pink-and-whiteness of her, the jewel gleam of her vivid blue eye; it seemed forged to launch just that one quiet, pertinent question that got under his defences.

"Well, what is the point, Angus?"

"Goodness knows!" he said irritably.

When he got back there were two piteous letters, one from Pat and one from Kane. Kane wrote impulsively, reckless of grammar and coherency. "Fannie says she's going to marry that stoat Ripon. They are going to live on in the square and make a home for the old people. Oh! Angus, she doesn't, she doesn't really know the least little tiny thing about life! You must stop it, somehow; you've got to stop it!! I know Ripon. We've seen him quiet and smooth and sleepy before. Underneath that quiet smooth lies all sorts of cheap mental bric-à-brac she'd loathe to live with! Oh! you must do something. He's mean-souled, and Fannie isn't that. I know she's over age, but you've got to think of something! My goodness! you've got to! I'm writing Bobbie to go over and see you. You've got to stop this absurd thing! The old people don't want to live with her. They want to be on their own. I mean, it's plain truth, so few people want sanctuary, Angus. I'm writing Fannie. There must be something low and disgusting in Ripon's life you can find out. Men like that always do have something like that. Their very ways of working and eating are different, Tom Ripon's and Fannie's. I know you don't understand, but all that is terribly important to a girl. You've been so splendid about everything, Angus, we do look to you to be splendid about this. Fannie wanted a guardian more than any of us, if poor old Daddy had only known. Oh! Angus, she's lived all her life in a fairy-tale and now she can't see it's the ugly toad who's asking her and not the fairy prince."

Pat wrote briefly on a page in prep. time, but in equal distress.

Angus put on his hat and went across the square.

There was an unwonted gravity about the little Punchinello who opened the door.

"Is Miss O'Rane in?"

"She's in, sir."

"Is she alone?"

"Mr. Ripon's with her, sir. There's been a bit of an upset, sir."

"Over Mr. Ripon. They won't live with him."

"With Ripon?"

"Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and Mr. Cole. He had 'em all in the drawing-room this afternoon, told them he was going to marry Miss Fannie and make a home for all of them."

"I see," said Angus slowly.

"I'm not staying either, along of him. If you hear of a place, sir . . ."

"Where is she?"

"In her own study, sir."

He saw the danger of it all. Everyone had turned against Tom Ripon. He had become the under-dog. Her life had been a happy, conscious ministration to their needs. Clever, clever, cunning Ripon!

On the stairs he met Miss Proctor. The little woman had been crying. She drew him into the drawing-room.

"You've heard?" she said.

"I've come about it."

"He had us all in the drawing-room," her voice quivered with indignation. "Oh! you need a real gen-

tleman to offer you the bread of charity and yet make it seem like cake. Of course, we did exactly what he wanted us to . . . I see that now. We flared up against him. She had the letters from Kane and Pat and Judy beforehand. I didn't know that until after. Ripon was clever. He sat there as if he were stunned by it all. I heard him say: 'I've made a mistake. They don't want me. Nobody wants me.' "

"What's her attitude on this?"

"Utterly determined." She listened, crept quickly outside the door and returned with the little poet Cole.

"Angus has heard they're engaged, too," she said. The little poet shook his head.

"Our attitude," he said. "All of us. It's isolated them together. The last thing to be desired. They're banded together. Anything you do will be wrong, everything you do will further it." He paused. "In a way Ripon has played chess with us all," he said. "We're where he meant us to be at the beginning of the game." He paused. "He'll carry off the queen," he said.

"Not while I'm here."

"Because you're here," said the little poet Cole, quietly.

"Something must be done," said Angus; his thoughts stood suddenly on tiptoe and then whirled round him like fiercely attacking things; he could not see or plan because of them, in his little, gentle, docile thoughts that had marched in order and decency all his life.

"I've had letters from Kane, from Pat."

"So has Fannie." The little poet was very quiet.

"I mean, her attitude is so natural, so inevitable, Angus. It's just a sequel to all that has gone before. They none of them realized the hurt it was to her, the shock. She was actually heroic in the attitude she maintained. The world she inherited from her father, that extraordinary world within a world she has administered all her life suddenly . . . decimated. Ripon secures her through his need of her. He promises her the material to rebuild her world. At the back of her mind she can't believe that Kane and Judy and Pat have done with it all. She believes they'll creep back to disprove you."

"One can't tell her," said Miss Proctor with quivering lips. "One can't tell her that we are very glad to go, old as we all are. One likes to be on one's own. One adores it." Her eyes shone a little. "It is only possible to owe to people when there is a chance of repaying. I mean, furnishing those rooms, everything, it's been like a breath of life to us . . . a breath of life. She calls it ingratitude in her heart; I suppose it is in a way. Gratitude should be temporary to be even bearable!"

Papa Pip came in. He carried three or four hyacinth bulbs in his hands.

"It's early to put them in," he said. "But I think I'd best do it or they'll be forgotten up in the loft. Well, Angus?"

"He's heard about Fannie and Ripon," said Mr. Cole.

"You don't want to see her to-night, my boy," said Papa Pip. "You don't want to see her to-night. She's overstrung." He shook his pink head with its absurd

fringe of silver hair, like fluff. "You go away and leave them to it."

"But I must remonstrate."

"You'll go away quietly if you're wise. He's got her against everyone. They're facing a hostile world together. D'you get me? Every bit of opposition strengthens his hand. D'you see? D'you think he wants us all living in his house? Not he!"

"You'd be crazy to see her to-night," said Miss Proctor.

"I could knock that damned fellow's head off," said Angus hotly.

"I think that's about all he needs to secure a special license," mused the little poet.

II

A long, interminable night. It seemed to grow in absurd streaks of summer and winter. Now Angus was hot, hot enough to throw his eiderdown off and his arms wide so that they rested on the sheets like cold water; now he was cold as if it were actually winter.

He had an odd thought. Love made men into highly strung girls; the sleeplessness and the tingle of hot thoughts, perhaps they drew together just in their love and became alike.

He heard the clock strike twelve.

He tried to marshal his thoughts, to make them stand in serried rows that he might review them and group them and make them work out solutions, which

was what they were obviously for, but they slipped about in foolish, haphazard, harlequin ways.

He heard the bell ring.

Of course, he'd go home. He visioned home with the vague, rather formless aridness with which youth visions death. There was lots of work for him to do there. His mother wanted him, cohorts of rather helpless, twittering female relations relied on him.

He heard someone coming up the stairs; there was a knock at the door; there was the spurt of a match and Robert de Bouton revealed in it.

He said: "I had Kane's letter about Fannie and the fellow just three hours ago. I was out. It was waiting for me when I got back. I came at once. What are you going to do about it?"

He seemed to whirl like an atom in the coloured kaleidoscope of his own thoughts.

"There's nothing to do, Bobbie."

Robert de Bouton came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"That's rot," he objected. "Absolute rot."

"I can't kidnap her, I can't persuade her. She's over age and her own mistress. She's determined. He's got her."

"A weasel like that!"

They sat quite quiet.

"We're all her enemies," said Angus. "I mean that's how she sees us. Now we've shown ourselves his enemies, too. That's banded them together. We've nothing against him except the very things that are his strength where she is concerned, his origin, his life."

"He's mangy, my dear boy, positively mangy."

"You won't make her see it."

"What are the latest developments?"

"The fellow offered to carry on the home for the old people. One can imagine he was pretty unbearable as the embryo philanthropist. One needs tact for that sort of thing. They kicked. They're not going to give up their freedom. They let their dislike of him creep through. The minute they go she'll marry him."

"Of course, they mustn't go."

"They're crazy to."

"Bribe them."

"It's all very well to yap."

Bobbie de Bouton lit a cigarette. The match made a stab of light in the soft darkness that they neither of them cared to change.

"Kane hates him," said Bobbie.

"So do I," burst out Angus. "I loathe him! I'd like to bash him about."

"Good Lord!" said Bobbie. "You! It's incredible! Poor old boy. It's got you. I always said it would when it came. You've got to hold on tight, frightfully tight, or he'll get her. He doesn't love her in the way you do at all. It's easier for him. He's not likely to do impetuous things." He paused. "Mustn't do impetuous things."

"I must do something," said Angus. "I mean, damn it all, man! I can't see it happen!" He paused. "He's coarse-fibred, all his ways, his thoughts, they're different from hers."

"I know," said Bobbie. "You've talked to Marjorie."

"I didn't know the whole thing was settled until to-day. I suggested it. She thought it was a good idea."

"I see," Bobby said slowly. "Of course, if it's like that. I thought she might suggest a way out. I don't know."

"I've got to see Fannie to-morrow."

"I should be almighty careful."

"You wouldn't approve?"

"I should be absolutely neutral. That's your one hope, neutrality; at least it can't force the issue, and you must coax the old people to stay there a bit."

"They're crazy to be off and start their careers. Oh! can't you understand?"

"You're not telling me *you* can . . . after all your dissertations on the subject! My good fool . . . what are their united ages? A hundred and eighty years setting off to make its name and fortune."

"Why not?"

"Because those things belong to youth. What's got into you, Angus? Are you losing all your common sense? Are you supposing poor little Mr. Cole can storm literary London, that Miss Proctor can conquer the musical critics of to-day? Why, boy! the idea's crazy."

"They've never had a chance."

"But good lor', man!"

"Hasn't common sense made this muddle?" said Angus excitedly; "we've made a fetish of it. Where's it all led? I believe Fannie's right with her imagination and her insight. All things are possible if you believe them possible. That's the keynote of it all . . .

sheer belief. I was sure of everything and now I'm sure of nothing, and that's when you begin to learn, Bobbie, when you move the heavy stuff in your mind that convention and heredity planted there and let the other things come in. What's all my precious common sense got for me out of life? It's lost me things . . . all along the line it's lost me things."

"I said the confounded place would mischief you. Look here, Angus, the whole lot of you may be in the soup yet. I'm going to marry Kane next year, but there are two others, Judy and Pat. Go level, old boy. Fannie doesn't know you're paying for their education yet. I mean that would be the last straw. That would humiliate her and send her into that lizard's arms. She couldn't stick it. She's treated you pretty rottenly really."

"What are you driving at?"

"Old O'Rane must have talked to this Ripon chap some time or other. Ripon went to that old ass the lawyer."

"Well?"

"He offered to make settlements on all the O'Ranes out of his £6,000, as some sort of return for the refuge O'Rane had provided in the past. Of course he guessed how the land lay and wanted to make sure."

"How do you know?"

"I met Barton, the lawyer, in the Temple. He was so full of it he ran over with information. When sentiment touches a man who deals in facts he goes absolutely to pot. Ripon had him prettily fed, gratitude and all the rest of it, and in return he had the whole O'Rane business spread out before him as bare

as a biscuit. The lawyer wouldn't hear a word against Ripon."

"You didn't tell me."

"I thought you'd got enough to go on with. I didn't see the danger of it till I got Kane's letter to-night saying Fannie had written saying she was going to marry him."

"But he hasn't told Fannie yet."

"It's his last card. Don't force his hand, Angus. The man's no fool. We ought to be able to find out something about him. A man with a fox face like his can't have lived a nice life."

"D'you suppose she'd listen?" He sat up in bed. "Look here, Bobbie. It matters to me. It matters to me like hell."

"D'you suppose I don't know? Do you suppose I strolled over here at this hour for a walk?"

"What do you suppose he'll do, Bobbie?"

"Whatever suits him best. Look here, Angus, mark time, that's all you can do. Persuade the old folks to stay on a bit. Don't force the issue."

Angus said doggedly:

"There's a way out of everything. There always is. It's just that we can't see it."

III

Gladys was very, very tired, and yet in her very tiredness there was a heavy sort of sweetness and mellowness because she was among beautiful things and beautiful colours, and her mind and her eyes and some-

times her small work-worn fingers caressed them openly and joyously.

Impossible to feel detached from them as some people did, to regard it all as something you could or couldn't afford, so much easier and happier to blend with it, to give yourself up to the queer spell that the banners of rose and blue georgette above your head created, to the bales of shimmering, jewel-like fabric that would evolve into evening dresses, to all the little gay glass and china powder bowls, to the thousand and one things that seemed to creep through your eyes down into you and shake you with a sort of frail, bright happiness, sway you with it as if you were a human harebell.

Her mind stopped tinkling and looked at itself with a little shock that had become so frequent it had almost degenerated into mere recognition. Here was she, the wife of a clergyman of the Church of England, steeping herself drunkenly in shops and merchandise, just exactly as some steeped themselves in art or music and other things that were supposed to put them a notch above other people.

It was warm in the big shop; not warm enough to start ones' chilblains, but warm enough to make one forget the hole in one's shoes that let in damp in a spot, so that it was like treading with a hot foot on a cold penny. The new daylight-light burnt in little blue shafts of down-beaten brilliance on the counters, artificial lights shone here and there making stinging pools of colour on satin and velvet and the vivid mottle of flowered materials.

Gladys Kerr gave a tiny smile, a tiny smile.

She wished vaguely that she could have afforded tea and hot toast.

She could hear the fret of the music far away; sometimes when doors swung open it was thrown at her in a shrill, joyous lilt, almost like a laugh.

She would have liked to sit quiet and sip tea out of thin china and watch the waitresses rushing round with their trays of cakes like children's toys, and bending to deposit the customer's choice with silver tongs so that they had the absurd air of slaves gracefully salaaming; she liked the paper-white frilliness of the aprons, the blue frocks and the blue bows that matched the blue curtains and the blue ceiling, the scent of tea and toast and cakes and face creams and face powders, the whole atmosphere that like a thin, warm haze shut out for her reality and housework and the jarring clank of the machinery of life.

She wanted such a little really, this pale, pretty girl with the lustreless hair; just the coloured cotton-woolly life of the suburbs, its refinements, its daintiness, its secret pride and fierce little snobberies. She would have made a toy model village of her life, with only her fellow model villagers to come in and beat out the paths, and help her build the wall higher, so that they all grew in together, she and her children, shutting out everything that wasn't pretty or dainty or nice, letting in nothing that they could not incorporate neatly and satisfactorily.

It was fate that made her marry a man with horizons she could not see, with ideals that were like invisible ladders, with a mentality that continually ignored the

furnishings and fixings of life which were almost her only means of self-expression.

All her married life she had tried in secret ways to climb to Philip Kerr's level, she had tried prayer, hanging on to it as if it were a word formula that produced effects, she had tried self-abasement, she had tried to wriggle up from her materialism on some of the poetry her husband loved, but it only swung her far out so that her little aims and hopes and dreams became specks and she gained a frightening feeling of not really existing at all, and finally she had come down to sheer, hard, physical work as her only means of expiation for so persistently remaining herself. She worked like a nigger in her home and the parish.

At first she tried to demonstrate this littleness of outlook to Philip, but Philip refused to see. His love for her was like a great, warm magnifying glass through which her little trivial movements became titanic, her character strengthened, broadened and became beautiful. In desperation she groused to Philip, bombarded him with her little wants and unfulfilled requirements, but his love for her saw only the inevitable filings of a fine spirit perpetually refining itself by unselfish work for others.

Finally she grew scared by his respect of her. He saw her as she was not and never would be; his love lent to her a foreign personality and soul, and the belief in the companionship and the love of that personality and soul kept him happy, strong, even splendid in all his ways.

She saw that dimly. In ways that took the strength out of her, that filled her with a physical weariness

that was like death, she strove to justify herself and her real love for Philip that seemed so often like a little fire on an immense desert, by actual material service. She worked like two women, both in her home and the parish, and gained, not admiration or approbation, but, being a parson's wife, the conviction that if she could do that much she ought to do more.

In her happy meanderings round the great shop she was aware of Philip and the parish at the back of her mind, but it was queerly restful here, as if she had gone comfortably placid and toneless, content to see things and rejoice in them, and by and by she must resume her normal, aching, bone-structure and take it away to work with in real life.

She lingered near the glove counter.

There was no one buying gloves, and the girls, after a brief glance at her, went on with their talk; dances and frocks and a new buyer who, they said, was a public school boy.

"If I had a boy I should like to send him to Repton," said a blonde, powdering a glove with plaster-white hands.

The other two girls looked at her curiously. One was remembering what she had told her about her father, board school and Canning Town, and the other was remembering what she had told her about her only brother, Borstal and a shipping office in the Malay. They were holding these possibly forgotten confidences behind their faces, ready to produce them instantly.

"Oh! I don't know," said the blonde, suddenly remembering too. "It sounds mannish, Repton. I like boys to be mannish."

Gladys smiled involuntarily. That was how they used to talk in the old days. Not real talk, but the idle flowering of their stemless, rootless dreams.

It all came back to her like a poignant memory of youth.

She moved about the bargain tables, fingering odd lengths with fascinated fingers; this would make a charming nightgown button-holed in pink; if one cut carefully this would make a blouse.

The people round her became shadows encompassing her with blurred movement; it gave her a little aloof feeling, a sense of segregation, just as if she were alone with her secret planning.

One shadow detached itself and trailed mistily over the edges of her thoughts. It seemed always just a little behind her, or a little to the side; again and again she turned her shoulder on it almost pettishly.

Then suddenly she saw the length of crêpe de Chine, snow white, lustrous, heavy, wonderful in its fineness.

It was just the very thing! Just the very thing!

She *must* have it. She must have it! This impression lapped away all the unresisting brittleness of her other thoughts like an incoming tide.

She caught her breath. She even laughed a little with a child's absurd, happy delight.

She stretched out her hand eagerly.

She snatched it.

She wore an old-fashioned heather mixture travelling coat with a high collar turned up.

She felt a thrill of possession as she drew it inside her coat. So easy. So awfully easy.

Then suddenly she woke to consciousness of her

movements, to the significance of an almost involuntary act.

Sheer terror gripped her.

It was all instantaneous and yet it seemed to have covered an immense period of time.

The shadow that trailed over the edges of her thoughts suddenly stood rooted in them, blocking them with a terror-stricken darkness that was like night.

She knew that he had been watching her.

She knew that he had seen.

The second she moved he moved.

Her old velour was pulled down so that only the tip of the nose showed. She pulled it down lower and sprinted like a mad thing for the door.

The shop was full of casual shoppers, women with their mental processes slowed up by idle contemplation, drugged by vague speculation. She startled them, a suddenly hustling figure, they got between her and the detective with their slow, amazed stares, his angry cry to stop her blew over their heads like a warning whistle over the heads of sleepers.

Impetuously he shoved them on one side, their soft bodies and their soft furs seemed to clog his hands, their umbrellas and their stupid, rooted feet impeded his own feet like undergrowth.

He reached the entrance in time to see Gladys leap into a taxi.

Cursing savagely he leapt into another taxi and gave his orders, his explanations out of the window to the taxi-man as they moved off.

He had a loud voice. Some of the pedestrians heard; the doorkeeper with his huge umbrella to pro-

tect the heads of the precious car customers heard; they all stood clogingly too, and stared as well.

Inside the taxi the detective swore monotonously anathematizing all soft women in soft furs, his eyes glued to the taxi in front of him.

She hadn't thrown anything out. She didn't know she was being followed. He'd get her with the goods on.

IV

Gladys Kerr had only one desire . . . to get to Fannie O'Rane.

She had given the taxi-man the address almost without thinking.

Fannie O'Rane would put it right. Fannie O'Rane would scold her and tell her she was a fool, but it would all be put right.

She did not actually know she was being followed; she only felt it instinctively.

She screwed her eyes up tight and sat with clenched hands like a child waiting for a blow.

If the parish ever knew! My God! if the parish ever knew! Philip's beloved parish!

She began to pray in jerks and spurts, as if the prayers were being ground out of her involuntarily by some invisible method of torture.

If she could only have known *why* she took it.

She wasn't a shop-lifter! Anyone could see she wasn't a shop-lifter! She was the wife of a minister of the Church of England.

What would Philip do if they found out? Would

he be defrocked, or resign? He believed in her. Consciousness of his belief broke over her, causing her mind a deep, grinding, sweating pain.

If she could only die there in that little dark box of a taxi. Oh! Philip! Philip! Philip!

The taxi made a spurt forward.

The policeman held the traffic up behind them.

The detective leant out of the window.

He shouted to the policeman. His face grew red and mottled. People on the curb stared. He leapt out, then he leapt in and the policeman let him pass, but he held back all the other traffic and stood staring at the little taxi that had mingled with the downstream of the traffic.

When Gladys taxi drew up outside the door of the dreaming house in the dreaming square, the detective's taxi just turned the corner.

"Got her!" he said.

v

The little Punchinello butler let her in.

He said:

"Not an accident, mum?" scared by her, not by the whiteness of her face—he could hardly see it between her hat and coat, but warned by something indefinable about her.

"Miss O'Rane?"

"Drawing-room," he said.

Upstairs she bolted, stumbling a little in her long coat on the stairs, gasping, crying like something pursued by all the fiends of hell.

The lights were lit in the drawing-room, the smell of hot toast and tea came to her almost like a promise.

Fannie was there, a bust behind the great silver tea tray. She stilled the little tinkle of her pleasant tea-making.

"Why, Gladys!" she said.

Tom Ripon was there with his pipe and the squirrel brightness of his eyes; and Angus Reid was there.

She stood with her back against the door.

"Fannie!" she said, "I've stolen something. I've stolen something. I'm going to have a baby. I wanted it for the baby. Just one pretty thing. I don't know why I did it. I think they're after me."

She had an impression of instant division among her audience and yet no one moved, not a hand, not an eyelid. There was association with her and instant dissociation.

"Oh! Gladys!" Fannie said, awfully quietly, awfully uncensuring.

Angus Reid slipped to the window, the long velvet curtain shielded him.

"She's right," he said. "They're after her. There's a man in a taxi."

"Your hat," Fannie ordered. "Quick, Gladys. Give me your hat. Now your coat. Don't be a fool, my dear. I don't matter to anyone. That hat-pin, quick. Sit behind the tea tray. Quick!"

Tom Ripon unmoved behind his pipe, but paper-white, and the watching flick . . . flick . . . flicker of his bright, squirrel eyes.

"Fannie!" said Angus.

She jammed on the hat. Low down and shapeless as Gladys had worn it. She struggled into the coat

and buttoned it high. Her voice was low and quiet and quick, it seemed to patter out her words.

"It isn't only the baby, it's Philip. Swear you won't ever tell him. Swear! Go on, swear!"

A thunderous knock on the door shivered her words.

Tom Ripon sprang to his feet.

"Look here!" he said, "I want to get out of this. The police have got a down on me. I've left all that behind me! Look here."

"Fannie!" said Angus.

They looked at each other.

"Oh! please! please!" said Fannie. "Oh! please! please! please!" her voice made a little queer song, a song that seemed to flutter and throb.

Gladys was saying out loud in a level, heavy way, over and over again: "I swear. I swear. I swear."

Fannie stooped and put her hand over her mouth. She was holding the white crêpe de Chine in her hand. She was smiling, a sweet nailed-on smile that was like a mask she held in place.

"Philip" she said to Gladys. "Philip!"

"I'll never tell him as long as I live. I swear on oath," Gladys repeated under her hand.

"Look here!" Tom Ripon was urgent. "I tell you I won't be dragged into this. I tell you I won't be."

The door was flung open.

They saw the Punchinello butler gesticulating agitatedly behind a tall man.

The tall man swooped on Fannie and Fannie screamed. The scream was not like Fannie. It was as if she released it from a little box and watched it flutter about their ears, gauging its effect.

The detective put his hand under her coat suddenly, deftly.

"Ha! milady!" he said. "Ha!"

She screamed again, that funny little scream as if she had released the sound accidentally and was a little startled by it herself.

"Caught with the goods on you," said the detective.

"I didn't mean to," she said. "I don't know what came over me."

"Keep it," he advised curtly. "Keep it till you need it. Don't waste it on me. Is this your home?"

"It is," said Fannie.

"I'll have to take the names and addresses of everyone here."

The little Punchinello butler was pantomiming with his hands; his mouth was sagging loosely and his face was putty-coloured.

Fannie looked at him. Her face was grave, her voice was steady.

"It's quite all right," she said. "Mr. Reid will explain. I trust you."

"Keep your mouth shut," ordered the detective curtly.

"Live here?" he said to Gladys.

She made a vague gesture with her hands.

"Name?" barked the detective.

"Mrs. Philip Kerr," said Angus Reid quietly.

"Wife of the Rev. Philip Kerr. A parochial call."

"Sorry," said the detective. "Matter of form." He turned to Tom Ripon.

"I refuse to be drawn into this," Tom answered has-

tily. "I refuse to give my name. I am an acquaintance."

"Thomas Ripon," said Angus quietly.

"Ah!" said the detective. His glance was half furtive, an instinctive memorizing and classifying.

"And you?"

"I am coming with the lady," said Angus.

"I shall charge her at the local police station."

"It is just round the corner."

"I know that," said the detective.

He looked round the room. It was a pretty room. It was a cosy room. It was full of bronze chrysanthemums and firelight and the smell of tea and hot toast. Gladys was crouched over the tea things. Tom Ripon was staring at the detective. His eyes were no longer cheerful squirrel eyes. They were ugly with memories and thoughts.

It was on Tom Ripon's face that the detective's eyes rested last.

There was a dreadful silence when they had gone. It was as if a great wind had blown through the room and carried off the living, and there were only dead things left, dead things that did not move.

A big bronze chrysanthemum began to drop petal by petal. It was like the bodies of singed moths falling.

They heard the taxi chug away.

Suddenly Gladys began to tinkle the teaspoons, to tinkle them so that it sounded like a rosary. She began to say softly, monotonously: "I swear never to tell Philip as long as I live, as long as I live, as long as I live."

The door burst open and the little Punchinello butler stood there with the tears pouring down his face.

"I've known her from a baby!" he said. "What's it mean, sir, what's it mean? What devilment is it? He asked for the lady who'd just come in. I said, 'Upstairs, sir.' "

Gladys Kerr behind the tea tray still went on unconsciously fingering the teaspoons and repeating:

"I swear never to tell him as long as I live."

Tom Ripon sprang to his feet, threw his arms in the air and shouted in a sharp, high, ugly voice:

"For Christ's sake stop it, can't you?"

Chapter VIII

I

THEY did not speak in the taxi.

The detective and Fannie sat side by side. She looked almost grotesque, the slit of her white, composed face between the down-slammed hat and the up-turned collar. There was contrast in the immaculateness of her tiny, expensive nigger suède shoes peeping below the shabby hem of the shabby coat. It was as if her outfit were prelude to adventure.

"Where are you taking her?" Angus said.

"Local police court," the detective spoke laconically, grudgingly.

"Oh, no!" said Fannie sharply.

They both looked at her in equal surprise. She shrank back from their looks as if from physical contact.

The detective said again grudgingly, glowering at her with his large red mottled face, which was no longer angry or apprehensive, but pleased in a fat, sleek, childish way:

"You can elect to be tried by the magistrate or go to trial, or the magistrate can if he thinks it necessary, send you for trial whether you like it or not. You'll have to appear ultimately in the police court of the district in which the crime was committed. That's the law."

His voice was like a grim book, opened, read, shut down.

"Bail?" Angus Reid said curtly.

"The inspector or superintendent of the police court has power to grant bail if there's no chance of accused being brought up before the magistrate within twenty-four hours."

"If there is I'll have to stay?"

"I'm not here to answer questions, young woman."

As he climbed out of the taxi this burly man in plain clothes seemed by some fantastic magic to become a policeman, to don the grotesque majesty of the uniformed law. His humanity became eclipsed by a tremendous blankness that was yet full of tremendous self-importance.

The room they went into was like a bank. There were counters and books on it; a little weedy woman in moleskin was saying to a tall policeman who was making entries in a colossal book: "We shall be away from the seventeenth to the thirtieth. The keys are with my charwoman, who has worked for me for years."

The detective said something to another policeman; they lifted a flap in the counter and went through. Fannie heard the woman in moleskins say in a thin voice: "Is she drunk?"

They passed a room from which the buzz of a boys' school swept out, and the smell of cocoa; she could see clipped heads like the head of the soldier-gentleman on the recruiting posters.

She thought that police stations are neither sordid nor imposing, but particularly clean, empty, imper-

sonal places. She thought what everyone thinks so many times in real life, that so few things are like they picture them in books; there were no drunks hammering on cell doors or lost children being comforted on masculine knees, there was no interest or excitement.

Well-planned machinery was set invisibly in motion in precisely the same emotionless, effortless, inevitable way it works in a hospital when a fresh case is brought in.

The inspector looked at her.

"What charge?" he said.

There was an odd look in his eyes. They consulted together, the detective and he, as if she were a case who suddenly betrayed symptoms that had been waited for. The inspector had the air of a man who sees his diagnosis confirmed.

"I know the name," he said, and then again, "I know the address."

The detective stared. The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"Bolsheviks," he said. "I had trouble during the war."

Fannie broke out passionately. "It was nothing to do with the O'Ranes."

"I am here to stand bail," said Angus quietly, evenly, interruptively. "Will you ring up these people to verify my statements or do whatever is necessary? There is my personal card."

It was all so easy, so trifling, that was Fannie's impression, only she was tired and they did not ask her to sit down. She sat down.

"Stand up!" barked the inspector.

She stood up. She had suddenly gone cold and deaf with realization. That was how the Law got you—just on the end of a long bit of string . . . and suddenly the pull. The burble of voices went on round her. She heard Angus giving names, a well-known K.C.'s name, a baronet's name. He had letters with him. He handed them over. There was telephoning; Angus's voice, keen, urgent, and the inspector's voice, flat and doubtful. Gradually their attitude towards him changed. It was as if they permitted him to share that peculiar attitude of mind towards her that robbed her of personality, sex, class and type.

After a long time the inspector said:

"She can go."

They went out together into the street; by little roads it was only a stone's throw from the square. A fleeting thought swept in and out of her mind; the taxi had gone a tortuous way round to find the police court, they had gone a tortuous way round in the police court to find out very simple things. Her uncaring state was almost restful.

"Don't worry," Angus urged, as they went down the steps. The fine grey dusk met them like a kind cloak, wrapped itself round them so that after the bareness of the police station they had a feeling of being instantly cared for, protected.

"They were horrible to Daddy over Tom," she said quietly. "I remembered the inspector the minute I saw him. They wanted to turn us out, just as if we had been a nest of vipers and wasps. The law couldn't touch us. That made them hate us. They had Daddy

up. They said he harboured enemies of the realm. Daddy said he was only a refuge for the oppressed. They used to watch outside the house. If we showed one tiny gleam of light during those days they summoned us."

"It'll be all right," Angus repeated.

"The detective knew Tom's name," said Fannie. "Poor Tom!"

"No one matters but you." Angus's voice trembled a little.

He was not so much passionately identifying himself with her as unconsciously acting in natural accordance with some sympathetic and instinctive understanding that seemed always to have been there, while the old antagonism was effaced by it as if it had never existed.

"They won't expect us back so soon," she said.

They passed through the crowded streets like pilgrims through a carnival, their voices detached themselves from the hurly-burly and travelled to each other's ears like secret, private messages of individual comfort. The garish light of the little shops spangled them, and the darkness from doorways that night made mysterious blotted them out again gently, giving them over to each other in their mutual invisibility in a way that was strange and startling to them both; so that their very thoughts seemed to companion each other and be no longer hidden and alone.

"You know Philip Kerr," she said.

It was not a question. It was just a statement. Because of that unity there was between them it im-

plied and accepted his understanding of the thing she was doing.

"Gladys will become as wonderful as he thinks her," she said.

"But what of you, *you?*" he demanded.

"I see the thing awfully clearly, Angus, I think. We're all stones thrown into the pool of life. We make our little ring on it. I've made mine. But Philip Kerr is a big stone . . . his ring will widen and widen, it will bring joy and comfort and security to thousands of difficult lives. We can't let this thing cut across it and break it up. He'd have to resign. There would be all his good, strong, fine life motiveless. I matter such a little, my influence is so small. It doesn't give me pleasure to think this, Angus. Why! at the moment I don't matter any more than a mother whose family have grown up and gone out into the world."

"We're all of us identified with other people," he said.

"No one will know," she said. "I . . . I shall be out again before Judy and Pat are back for the holidays. Kane is away for the year. We shall have to tell Miss Proctor and Papa Pip and little Mr. Cole."

"But they'll wonder why they don't hear from you, Kane and the rest."

"You must say I have broken my right wrist. Miss Proctor can write letters supposed to be at my dictation every week. It won't be many weeks you see."

"I'll get you the first counsel at the bar."

"No! No!" she protested quickly. "Can't you see, that way it will draw attention to it. It will get into the papers. You must let this go through quietly,

quietly without anything at all to differentiate it from any other form of petty theft."

They turned into the square.

"Isn't it funny?" she said wonderingly, "such a little time we were here, and none of this had happened. Things happen so quickly."

"Look here," he pleaded. "I've got to talk to you before this thing gets complicated by the dismay and horror of all the other people who have got to know. It's your attitude that matters—not theirs, and the attitudes will get tangled up and I shall not be able to see simply as I see to-night. *You* won't be able to see simply as you see to-night, Fannie . . . it is so; one has a clear, honest picture of relative values . . . and then the colour of other people's opinion oozes in and it is lost."

"But Tom . . ."

"Give me a minute," he said.

She bowed her head.

"They leave the square garden gate open after the flowers are dead." He knew that as he crossed the road. He pushed the little iron gate, and it opened under his hand. They passed through, and he shut it after him and shut out the world. The world seemed to draw back on tiptoe and leave a hushed stillness that was like a gift vouchsafed to them.

"I will do anything and everything you wish," he said.

"I am going to ask you something far harder. I am going to ask you to do nothing."

There was no moon, no mystery, no romance. There was a wistful brooding tranquillity in the half denuded

trees, there was an unmoved stillness in the slow disintegration of summer beauty that was taking place in the darkness around them, that was peaceful as the unquestioning acquiescence of age towards death.

"Everything I can think of," she said, "every aspect of it makes it impossible to do anything but what I am doing. They would let Gladys off because she's going to have a baby. Think! Think of the publicity and life afterwards for them both. Only think!"

"They're like shadows behind you," he said. "I only see them when you move yourself to point them out to me."

"Don't let me pity myself," she said sharply. "Don't let me think of this act in any other way but as the act of saving two children from disaster . . . almost an instinctive thing. It's the only way to look at it. You know Philip is a great man."

"I know he's a clergyman. Men don't look at clergymen naturally, and so they don't see them naturally. She's just a silly kid, crazy on clothes."

"You're not helping," she said, "you're pushing against me again." She clasped her hands, her voice supplicated quietly and urgently. "Oh! Angus! Angus! can't you see? for me it's just an incident. It doesn't pull my life up sharp like a horrible accident and turn it into a darkness. It doesn't make me an outcast in my own sight because in my own sight and the sight of those that care for me and know the truth I am magnificently justified. It is almost as if I had availed myself of a privilege. If I let this thing happen to Philip and Gladys I should be making outcasts of them."

He said:

"You mustn't talk to me like that, you know, because you make me see what you don't seem to want recognized . . . the magnificence of you shining through the magnificence of what you do."

"I think I want you to think well of me."

"I think I do," he said.

They sat quite still on a little seat. Far off they could hear the roar of the traffic like a great river running endlessly. There was the primrose blur of many lights, but over them a little private canopy of quiet darkness was stretched, upheld by the tarnished silver of distant stars.

"You are my friend," she said.

"I am your friend," he answered.

His eyes were wet. He was oddly relieved by that. It reassured him like the outward weal of some terrific blow. It was the outward manifestation of the unspeakable things that he was hiding in his heart. The quietness of his voice was laid over them at tremendous cost, by iron self-control, like a hand laid over fire to keep it under.

"We must let the law take its course," she said quietly. "And so work itself out with no untidy ends for other people to pick up. You promise me you'll do nothing to make things easier for me."

"If you wish it, I promise."

"If you only knew how quiet I felt about it all."

She rose to her feet. The houses seemed to creep nearer them, almost as if they were tactful old chap-erons that their movement had recalled to a sense of duty; they were aware of the blurred peering of lighted

windows; they became conscious of music, the thin silvery tinkle of pianos.

She said, very, very quietly and evenly:

"As I don't have to appear at the police court before two days it will be quite all right. The name of O'Rane won't enter into it at all."

He said, "Why?" The word seemed to fall an indescribable distance before it struck an answer, and all the while his mind hung suspended over it, watching in dismay and apprehension.

"Tom and I are going to get married the day after to-morrow," she said. "He has the license."

II

The tea tray stood unmoved beside the fire, which had dulled to a sullen glow, the curtains were not drawn; the chilly evening pressed greyly against the windows at either end of the long, low room.

At their entrance Tom Ripon sprang from the same seat he had occupied at their exit. Their eyes, accustomed to outside darkness, saw his face as a sharp white blur.

Nothing had altered except themselves, and they had gone out and come back quite different.

"Tom," Fannie said. She was suddenly reined in by the overwhelming consciousness of having returned an alien.

"Good God!" he burst out. "Can't you tell me what happened?"

"Yes. I am to appear at the police court. I elected

. . . anyway I'm to be tried by the magistrate. I'm out on bail." She paused. "Did Gladys go home?"

"Yes. I suppose so. I don't know when she went. I didn't notice. Good God! Fannie, d'you think you've any right to come back to me as . . . as if you'd just been out to tea."

"Yes," said Fannie, "if I feel like that." She paused again. "I want to feel like that."

Tom Ripon swung round on Reid.

"Is it the time for that sort of vague talk? Tell me what happened, Reid, everything."

Fannie walked to the window—stood looking down into Papa Pip's garden while Reid complied. Her fingers drummed a little song on the glass.

Tom Ripon began to pace the room.

"It's crazy!" he jerked at them. "A twopenny-half-penny girl like Gladys Kerr! Get yourself muddled up with the police for her! They'll let her off. There isn't a doubt! She'd never smell the inside of a prison. You don't know what it is to get muddled up with the police . . . only once and they've got you. They've a right to look at you, to speak to you, years afterwards, in a way . . . Oh! I know! Don't think I don't know."

Fannie came back to the centre of the room. She put coal on the fire. It darkened and chilled the room.

"You mustn't take it like that, Tom."

"Take it? Good God, I don't take it at all. I'll tell 'em the whole story."

"Do you think they would believe you? They took me red-handed—I think they call it that—with the goods on me."

"You acted on impulse. The whole thing was done in a jiffy! Reid . . . talk to her."

"I haven't anything to say."

"What d'you mean, you 'haven't anything to say'? You know what it means to Fannie. She'll be ostracized. She's sacrificing herself for a rat of a woman with no more guts than . . . Think of Kane—your pal's going to marry her; think of those kids at school. What d'you mean, you 'haven't anything to say'?"

"I shan't be prosecuted under the name of O'Rane," said Fannie.

"What do you mean, Fannie?"

"I shan't be called up till after we're married."

"I see," said Tom Ripon, "I see." He relit his pipe with a hand that trembled. In the upflare of the match they saw his good-looking, sharp face. He began to bluster. He kicked up the bluster all round him like dust to hide his preparations for ignominious flight. "My God! d'you think when I've worked my way out I want it all raked up."

"You mean you don't want to marry me if this goes through?" She was so quiet, like someone serving peacefully at a peaceful breakfast table, her flexible voice held just that casual "Coffee or tea?" note.

"I can't," he said, with an ugly little gulp. "You must see that, Fannie. You know how they were to me that time!"

He was just like a squirrel, Angus thought, squirming about in a very agony of nervous self-preservation, twittering, chattering, shrilling with panic in his bright eyes.

"I can see what you're thinking, both of you," he said in a high voice, "but you don't know. You haven't been through it and you don't know."

Fannie said: "You don't know what I'm thinking, Tom, or you couldn't stay in the same room as my thoughts of you. Please go away. I don't want to see you any more in my life. Angus, please see that he goes."

She went out of the room very quietly and left the two men together.

Tom Ripon was grey now. He made little futile, girlish gestures with his hands, his too brilliant eyes sought anchorage.

"I know what you are thinking of me and I don't care," he said. "I don't care because you don't understand. If you understood, I should care. Fannie stood for me as a symbol, a promise. She . . . she's become a betrayed trust, an outraged symbol. It isn't going to cast me down, all this. You watch!"

Angus said:

"Look here, Ripon, it's wasted on me all this . . . this word-scum. It can't hide up the thing you've just done. I think you'd better go."

Ripon began to pace the room. He trailed and swirled words round him until it seemed to Angus standing motionless in emotional turmoil that it became a fantastic dance of explanation.

"Reid, look here! I've only just got in the queue with the rest of the world. I dare not lose my place. I want to identify myself with all that is normal and conventional and smooth and easy. D'you know what I've been all my life? A sort of pavement contor-

tionist hating to be looked at. It's been hell. A man like you can't understand. The under-dog is not a romantic creature, he's not even a pathetic creature. He's born with a loathsome, festering grouse that rises from his secret desire to be like other people. I can be like other people, a little better than most people. I've been a marked man all my life. If I married Fannie to-morrow it would all come up . . . the old story of my insurrection against the things I secretly coveted. I should become Tom Ripon, known to the police, the slum-grouser, the low-down Bolshevik. D'you think I want it now I've six thousand pounds a year and I've won free? I'm not the same man I was. The money's made me over. I know it. I know it. I'm sleek, smug and I love the feeling. It's the wine of life to me. I want a wife who shall minister to the happiness I have discovered. I thought Fannie would. She was a lady. I could gloat over that and get pleasure from it. She was small, with fine, useless hands and tiny feet. England's not a free country. No country is free. Life isn't free. A man is prisoned in the memories of his friends and enemies alike. All that socialistic stuff I spewed up during the war . . . it's indissoluble, it is me. The world won't let a man change. He is prisoned in their minds by the opinions he has uttered which are perhaps no longer his." He flung around. "Look at you! You're ordinary, but you can't shake free of the pose you thought was you till you found out. You came here as an unimaginative, practical, prosaic man of affairs, devoid of romance or sentimentality. This place has got you, squeezed you into

fresh shapes, built up your imagination till it juts over everything, but people will go on expecting the limited, common or garden man of affairs. Once we have expressed our beliefs in words they become identified with us and we with them, long after we have outgrown them and they us, long after they have become burdensome and hideous to us. We change, but the world sees us still as we painted ourselves before we grew, and we cower behind their vision of us, stunted and depressed by it. I wanted Fannie to help me maintain and evolve the personality I have become, the personality I was meant to be. If I marry her it allies me to the self I abhor. I'm not strong enough. Frankly, I'm not strong enough."

"This doesn't serve any purpose," said Angus Reid.

"Look here! I beg of you. Oh! I know what I'm talking about. Get her out of this. Lie, cajole, frighten. She doesn't know what she's in for! I do. If they get her . . . if she goes to prison. Good God, man! it isn't incidental . . . it's the dust on a fine thing, and it is never, never the same afterwards. Nothing that lowers you in the sight of your fellow men is incidental. For the Lord's sake, listen to me, Reid. I'm a prison bird. I know. It's a fine novelty thing she's doing . . . but there's got to be death at the end of it to make it come out right. Death must come at the end of all deeds of self-sacrifice to preserve their lustre and their beauty, or inevitable regret for them will eat in, inevitable common sense, inevitable sense of proportion. That Kerr woman isn't worth it, Philip and his future and his religion aren't worth it; it would be all right if they executed her and

she could die without knowing it . . . but she'll know it. She'll know it."

"I don't see that this is achieving anything."

"I shall go and see Gladys Kerr to-morrow. You're all crazy, all of you. You've lost consciousness of to-morrow. It isn't to-day that counts. To-day is always all right, it is to-morrow. The O'Rane atmosphere has got you, Reid. Shake free of it."

III

She opened the door herself and went grey at the sight of Ripon, so that it seemed as she leant against the yellowy red distemper of the passage as if she must fall to ashes before his eyes. Her hands were stained with apple coring. They picked, picked at the faded overall.

"I haven't brought news," he said. "Are you alone?"

Her whole agonized body and face seemed to make a straightening gesture of relief.

"Come in," she said; "Philip is out."

It struck damp in the dining-room study. A minute fire burnt. She put some grey, almost fluffy looking bits of coke on and dimmed what flickering life there was.

"You mustn't let Fannie O'Rane do this thing, Mrs. Kerr," he said. "You mustn't."

She sat down and looked at the grey fire, and even her blue eyes seemed more faded than usual, as if they dwelt mysteriously behind a mist of thoughts.

"Can't you see," she said quite simply and honestly,

"how much easier, how much nicer it would be to own up? Then it would all be over and done with. Now it will never be over, never be done with. It will always be there."

The eloquence he had prepared for her suddenly went limp and useless in his mind, so that he could only throw it away.

"I'd give anything to go to prison and work it out that way, but it can't ever be worked out," she said. "I am in prison," she told him. "I am in prison . . . my way out would be through the real prison."

His mind was empty of all the junk he had put there, so that her words crept in and made pictures.

"You wouldn't go to prison," he said. "They'd let you off. They'd put it down to your condition. One could get doctors. It would be easy. They'll collar Fannie O'Rane. Do you think the magistrate won't know the history of the O'Rane household when she comes before him? D'you think they won't all know? You know what the O'Rane creed has been, to shelter the under-dog without reference to class or creed or colour. That's heresy. It will count against her. Nothing will be said, she'll be judged on the offence . . . but it'll be there behind the magistrate's face. It's heresy to develop philanthropy in unorganized, unauthorized channels. Only the mind that is obsessed by the idea that humanity should be catalogued, compartmented and systematized becomes a magistrate; it infuriates and inflames that type of mind that individuals should step in and side-track and harbour people that scream for classification and defined, organized

treatment. It thwarts their sense of power; it outrages their prestige."

She made a queer little gesture, as if she blew his talk away like dust that obscured the subject they had under examination.

"When is the trial?" she said.

"It should have been within twenty-four hours, but there has been a mistake or something. It is to-morrow."

She had the face of one who has tidings of her own execution.

"Shall I have to go?"

"No."

"I haven't told Philip."

He had a moment of pity for her, perception of the aspects of the thing as it appeared to her; a life-long, level martyrdom without glory, abatement or relief.

"I am going to be bright about it," she said.

He could only stare at her, amazement in his odd, brilliant eyes. He caught the inner meaning of her words. She was actually smiling. He saw her lift that smile as an invisible crown of thorns and put it in position.

"If I could only take Fannie's place and get it over," she said. "But it will never, never be over for me. I couldn't sleep last night. I thought how terrible to be a murderer and never found out."

"Look here," he said sharply. "That isn't healthy, Mrs. Kerr."

"It will be over for Fannie," she said. "It's really over now. If I told Philip the truth it would never be over for him either. It wouldn't only be giving up

his work and his mission; that would be the least of it. Who knows the truth?"

"Reid, myself, Fannie and the butler fellow who let the detective in."

"And Miss Proctor, Papa Pip and little Mr. Cole."

"Reid made me swear before I left I wouldn't tell. No one is to know but just us four."

"And my responsibility is to those I love best," she said. "My husband and my child." Her hands made queer little stroking gestures on her frock. "I am going to be a good woman," she said. "I won't even have to kill all my littlenesses, my love of clothes, my vanity. This thing has killed them, so that it is like building up again out of a great emptiness. You cannot think how empty life has become, just knowledge of this thing and I alone for ever and ever."

"Time wipes out things, you know, Mrs. Kerr."

She looked at him, the curious look that seemed to come out of something, something indriven and remote.

"When are you going to be married?" she said quietly.

"We are not."

"Is it this?"

"Yes, in a way."

"She didn't love you," she told him, with queer impersonality. "She was only sorry for you. It isn't the same thing. I didn't know I loved my husband until he went away."

He stared at her blankly.

"Good God! he hasn't gone away?"

"Not in the way you mean. He's still here. He

will be always with me, more than most husbands. I don't suppose you'll understand; a woman would. It isn't a question of what men do or where they are that keeps them close to women's hearts. It is women who place them there, not the men themselves. When this thing came in I had to send Philip out. There was not room for both. It is not always being together that makes for intimacy and possession. I expect Fannie will marry Angus Reid."

"Why?" he flung at her.

"Because she loves him."

He crossed to the window and stood staring out between the greyish coarseness of the Nottingham lace curtains. There was an aspidistra in a red pot on a blue china stand in the centre. He took a broad leaf and shredded it downwards so that it looked like grass. Two women passed and looked up at the rectory windows. They saw him, and he saw their stupid, instinctive thoughts. They did not look back, but they twittered about it all down the road.

"Are you sorry?" she said.

"I'd made preparation for her in my mind," he said. "And it's empty . . . that's all. I looked to her to supply something . . . something I'd coveted a long time. It couldn't have been . . . the shop-lifting wife of a late red revolutionist. I couldn't have stood . . . the stink of it all. That's the honest, absolute truth. She wasn't worth the price."

"She's fine," she said slowly. "She was fine before this happened. She's so simple, honest . . . so big." She paused. "Not like you are. Not like I

was." Again she paused. "Are you going to the court?"

"No."

"Will Kane and Judy and Pat have to know?"

"No, no! I don't think so. It won't get into the papers; it's too petty. No, that'll be all right. You see, that'll be all right. There are ways of keeping these things out."

"Legal ways?"

"Not legal ways. It's easy really. She has so amazingly, astoundingly few friends. It will be just as if she'd gone away on a little holiday."

"Will it be . . . long?"

"No," he said curtly.

He heard her little quivering sigh. He made movements with his shoulders, which were not narrow, but sloped like the champagne shoulders of a Victorian beauty. His mind accompanied this brushing movement so that she got swept to the side and he could only see himself again and his own relation to this absurd, fantastic business on which he had come to her.

"Why did you really come?"

"Because I suppose I didn't fully understand what was involved; your husband, his career, his calling, his spiritual obligations. . . . I mean by that the thousands of weak people who crowd round him, who cling to him."

"Why did you really come?" she repeated.

He said quite simply: "Because I don't want to lose Fannie. I don't want her to go to prison. That's why I came. I thought I could talk you round. I can talk most people round."

"You can't talk me round."

"No, I knew that the moment I came in." He paused. "Oddly enough," he said, "I see your point of view. I don't want to lose Fannie O'Rane."

"But you have lost her."

"You never quite lose a sentimentalist," he said, "unless you're a perfect fool."

"Can you . . . could you come and tell me the result to-morrow? Don't think I'm not grateful to Fannie; only it isn't a gratitude I can express, even to myself."

"I'll come round and tell you," he said.

The interview was totally unlike anything he had anticipated; that was because he had seen himself as the central figure. He had expected her to understand by a panoply of words, and he had understood her, had her whole attitude imparted to him almost without explanation.

"I meant to say a lot when I came," he said.

"So little can be said about this thing."

"So you think I've lost Fannie?" he threw at her abruptly.

"Yes."

"You said something about this fellow Reid. I thought they loathed each other."

"I think she thought up till quite a short time ago that she loathed him."

"Ah, well!" he said.

They heard Philip come in. Ripon watched Gladys's face. It did not lighten. It prepared itself, her whole attitude was a conscious preparation. He could not tell what lay behind it. She smiled at him. He gave

Tom's hand his usual, hard, nervous grip. He looked tired and rather worn.

"Mrs. Morris came round, Philip," she said. "She asked if you would go round and see her mother. Something about her will. They don't expect her to last the night."

"I'll go up at once. I shan't have time for lunch, dear."

"I thought you wouldn't; so I made a little oxo. It won't take you a minute to drink it, dear."

"She thinks of everything," Philip said to Tom. He watched her out of the room.

IV

It was a bright, crisp, gold and blue October morning; the last of the leaves whirled slowly down like tinsel butterflies and the world seemed clean and young and hygienic and curiously unfurnished.

"I think," said Angus, "whatever happens, it would be wise for you to go away for a little while. Why not join Kane in Venice? I could arrange it all by cable. Won't you leave it in my hands?"

"If you wish," said Fannie listlessly.

Angus had told Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and little Mr. Cole at Fannie's own request. The utter bewilderment on their whitened old faces made him long to tell them the truth. They stared at him with blank, incredulous eyes.

"It's not a joke, Angus?"

"It's not a joke, Papa Pip, I assure you."

"But you can't mean that Fannie . . ."

"Somebody will have to pay for this," said Papa Pip. "There's been a mistake."

"The thing is unthinkable!"

"She's shielding someone she was with."

"She was alone," said Angus Reid.

The whole thing was horrible; their dismay, their distress. He could not meet their eyes.

"Well, there it is," he said. "There it is."

"Then Fannie did it with a motive," said little Miss Proctor finally. "She hasn't revealed the motive, that's all. We must show her we know . . . we know." Her voice trailed off into tears.

"We must show her we know *her*," said Angus. "That's all that's needed . . . to remain just the same."

He went to Fannie.

"I think you ought to tell them. Their distress is piteous, and their bewilderment."

"We can't let anyone else know," she said.

"I'm not asking you to go back on it; only to make it a little easier for those who are going through it with you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "We can't let anyone else know."

On the morning of the trial they saw her off, a white-faced, perplexed little party of old people. He would not have them come with her.

"My dear," said little Mr. Cole, "we know there's something behind all this. We want to know."

"We want to know," echoed little Miss Proctor.

She said very, very quietly, facing them in the little dark hall:

"My dears, this isn't anything to know. It is something to forget. Kane and Judy and Pat, they mustn't ever know you know. Perhaps I shall come straight back here; in any case Angus will come straight back. You'll come straight back, won't you, Angus?"

"Yes," said Angus.

Papa Pip took her hand. He held it and looked at it as if it were a flower.

"People who work in gardens," he said slowly and tremulously, "you can't fool 'em, dearie, you can't fool 'em. I don't understand, but I know."

He held her hand a minute against his cheek and let her go.

Little Mr. Cole said: "I refuse to see this as anything but a *beau geste* in disguise. Good God! will anyone persuade me that *you*——!"

"Dear!" she said, and then again quiveringly: "Dears!"

"When Angus comes back he may tell us?" coaxed Miss Proctor.

She stood up very straight then and looked at them out of her level grey eyes.

"You are not my friends if you believe there is anything to tell. You must just accept." She ran very swiftly down the steps and out into the square with her lips twisted, and she waved to them absurdly, crazily, like a child who is striving to hide its emotion.

Angus said:

"Poor old things."

She said, in a quick, strangled voice:

"It's a good deal to ask of people . . . sheer

faith, but if they can give it they'll be richer for it." She paused. "You promise to go back at once?"

"I promise to go back at once."

"It's so absurd to make a fuss about this thing. Isn't it always absurd to make a fuss about something that has happened to millions before you . . . just because it has never happened to you, and doesn't one always do it?"

"I suppose so," he said.

"Poor Gladys this morning!" she said below her breath.

He wondered if she saw herself at all in this affair.

"Tom Ripon sent me some roses," she said.

He stared at her in amazement.

"The absolute swine!"

"You mustn't, you *can't* judge, Angus. You *don't* know. They sent him to the coal mines; and then to prison. He went through hell. I know. He came back to us as if from a torture chamber . . . just like that mentally. It was terrible. You don't know. The hand of the world against him. He *had* to behave that way?"

"What way?"

"With me," she said. "He wrote me a letter this morning. Such a letter, Angus! As if to-day were the end of the world and only he knew it. If you thrash a child nearly to death for lying it will lie again to avoid another beating. Don't you see what I mean, Angus? Tom had to behave like that. It was almost an involuntary action. It was self-defence."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I believe I see these things with less sympathetic insight and more common sense," he said.

"The old god," she flung at him, smiling.

"The old god," he said.

v

The court was small, dark, almost deserted, and smelt of Jeyes' Fluid and roses. An old woman in a tartan shawl sat in the seats reserved for the public, furtively tying up red roses. Angus watched her wire the fallen head of a rose on to a stem, and wondered whether she were there as witness or spectator. She did not seem to be listening or watching. She was absorbed in her richly perfumed merchandise, beside her sat a small, wan creature with its hands folded and the look of curious blankness worn by the child who is consciously trying to be good.

"It's the magistrate who knows me," Fannie whispered.

A man was before the magistrate, a little pale man with a waistcoat, a tie and a nose that all rode up. He had an invincible air of good humour.

"I could stand up all by myself," he kept repeating cheerfully. "I did stand up all by myself, sir, I assure you."

Angus saw the detective who had arrested Fannie at the back of the court. He was talking to a sergeant. He was grinning away cheerfully. He looked extraordinarily homely and at home. The whole place was like a London office; everybody had time to spare.

He could even hear a typewriter clicking away somewhere.

Then suddenly he became aware that his hands were so tightly gripped that the palms had become like blotting paper. He opened them, and the ordinary air caressed them like a little wind.

Fannie was no longer beside him. Fannie had gone to join the little stream of human traffic that meandered through this dark court every Wednesday.

Already she seemed to have lost something of her personality. She sat with her hands quietly clasped. He wondered if she were frightened. He would have liked to jump across to her, to seize her hand and scamper madly out of the place with her, but he knew that on that instant the place would spring to life; and he wanted it to stay quiet and still as it was; its peacefulness was like darkness that cloaked terror.

A sergeant came out and looked round. He was very smart. His hair went back in a lick.

Angus felt his mind grow black and hot with hatred of it all; and the hatred poured out of his own utter impotence, like an immense volume of steam out of a tiny hole.

If only someone knew the truth. If only he could go and talk to Bobbie. If there were only someone who understood the ridiculousness and the splendid idiocy and the crazy beauty of it all.

Then the blind steam of hate cleared, and he saw that other people's ignorance made a bond between himself and Fannie.

At that moment she looked at him and smiled.

The little man was saying: "Thank you, sir," and grinning all over his face.

A girl slithered into a seat in front of him. She looked half apprehensive, half pleased. He judged it to be her first visit and in the nature of an experiment. She opened her little attaché-case noiselessly, glanced at her knitting, touched the needles tentatively and closed it again. She looked at Angus and bent back to whisper:

"What's the charge?"

"Drunk," he said briefly.

She settled down to watch proceedings as if it were a film just explained to her.

It was extraordinary how difficult he found it to concentrate, to absorb the reality of it. His mind formed itself into an absurdly rigid protection for Fannie without heeding particularly the thing against which it strove to protect.

He heard her name called.

The name went winging through him and touched his heart in an odd way like a chord of music.

The girl in front of him whispered cautiously and nervously:

"Did they say petty larceny?"

He thought the detective's evidence would be sufficient, but the firm of drapers from which the crêpe de Chine was stolen had sent a solicitor with glossy hair and glossy clothes and a glossy manner to match.

The flower-woman got up and went out, and the scent of roses went with her and the Jeyes' Fluid was left.

"The prisoner comes from a family notorious for their sympathy with . . ."

"That is irrelevant to the case," said the magistrate curtly.

The glossy lawyer sat down.

The detective rose. He held the crepe de Chine in his hand as if he were about to put it up for auction. He glanced round the empty court as if he were sorry there were not more prospective customers. He began to speak in exactly the voice he had used in the O'Ranes' drawing-room. It was very odd. It was as if he sought to impress his hearers with the excellency of his training and instincts by his voice, a woolly old sheep dog barking to show he was also an excellent house dog.

Fannie's was the last case to be called.

One of the policemen yawned tremendously. The girl with the attaché-case smuggled a chocolate out and stuffed it furtively into her mouth.

The glossy lawyer was glaring at the thinnest gold watch Angus had ever seen.

Something cold trickled ticklingly down the side of his nose. It was a bead of perspiration. His forehead was bedewed with it.

Fannie had got seven days in the second division.

Chapter IX

I

HE wanted to run back to the house of dreams, to set the streets and the people racing by him like a cinematograph film, to obtain a sense of speed. He found he could only walk quietly and steadily, carrying his memory of her unsmiling tranquillity precious upright as if it were an egg. He did not want to lose it. He wanted to transmit his impression of it, as comfort to the people who waited.

As he turned into the square he saw Ripon emerge from the house and run swiftly in the opposite direction to himself.

He was amazed.

The butler opened the door as his hand touched the bell.

He said:

"Oh, sir! Oh, sir!" and then, "Can't you keep it out of the papers? Can't you keep it out of the papers?"

"You knew?" he said.

"Mr. Ripon came here almost as soon as you left with Miss Fannie. He had them telephone him the result through from the police station—a friend, I think. He was walking up and down, up and down like a mad thing, talking."

He went upstairs quietly, into the drawing-room where they waited.

"She was tremendously brave," he said. "I wish you could have seen her."

"Did she break down?" queried Miss Proctor.

"They rang through to Ripon," Papa Pip said. "We knew almost at once. He's gone to tell Mrs. Kerr."

"Not a prison-van?" queried Miss Proctor.

"No, they hire a conveyance from a local contractor."

"A wardress?"

"No, they have a sort of matron in connection with the police station that they call in, but it wasn't necessary in a case like this. Just a policeman."

"My God!" said little Mr. Cole.

"She was so quiet about it all," said Angus.

Miss Proctor began to cry.

"When she comes out she's going away for a little while. She's going to join Kane for a few months, before Kane goes East. I think it will be wise."

He paused. There was some emotion in the room he could not fathom. He could feel it as a blind man might feel the presence of something unseen, infinitely disquieting, undefined.

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Miss Proctor. "Oh, dear!"

Papa Pip went to the window and stood tapping on the glass.

"I suppose you know that when Ripon knew about this case he refused to marry Fannie," Angus said.

No one answered.

"Well?" he said, a little impatiently.

"He is what life made him," said little Mr. Cole unexpectedly.

"I am surprised at his coming here."

"Do you suppose he didn't want to know too," put in Miss Proctor.

"Look here," he began.

He stopped. He could not quite tell why Miss Proctor went on sobbing.

"If it hadn't been a magistrate who knew, she'd have got off," said Papa Pip.

"Then it was Ripon's fault she was convicted," Angus put in sharply. "He was the cause of the O'Ranes first coming in touch with the police. He's caused nothing but trouble and wrong to the family from the first. Look here, I'm going to give orders for him not to be admitted."

"Oh!" expostulated Mr. Cole sharply. "You mustn't do that. You mustn't do that on any account!" His whole manner betrayed intense anxiety and apprehension.

"Fannie wouldn't like it," Miss Proctor swept into the conversation. "Fannie would be furious. I assure you, Angus, I assure you it would be an absolutely false move."

"It would be very, very foolish, very dangerous to do that," said Papa Pip.

They were all watching him.

"But she said she didn't want to see him again. I assure you I was here. I . . ."

"But something has happened since," interrupted Miss Proctor eagerly. "Something wonderful and beautiful."

"In connection with Tom Ripon."

They all nodded their old heads solemnly. They were consumed with eagerness and excitement.

"Am I not to know what this marvellous thing is? You didn't know anything about it when I left here."

"No. It was while we were all waiting anxiously that Tom told us."

"We are pledged to secrecy," said little Mr. Cole.

"When Fannie is with us again you'll know," said Papa Pip, his face radiant. "That is Tom Ripon's condition."

"I don't understand," Angus Reid said. "I thought you all loathed and mistrusted him. What has happened in so short a time to obviously change your point of view?"

"A man may show you by his actions suddenly that your previous conception of him was wrong," said Mr. Cole.

"I await such a revelation with interest," said Angus Reid curtly.

II

The leaves were off the trees, a frost spangled everything coldly on the morning Fannie left Holloway.

No one met her at her own request. No one glanced at her.

She was very composed, pale, smiling.

The grey pile of Holloway frowned behind her against a grey sky. She moved away from it a little blindly. She had no particular sense of freedom or consciousness of escape. It was only that the

neighbourhood was unfamiliar. She halted by the Athenæum a minute waiting for a taxi; trams and buses lumbered by filled with girls with attaché-cases, and young men with last year's overcoats smelling of camphor.

All over London, winter was shaking out its furs and feathers and its canopy of soot and smoke; above her thin scarves of yellow, grey, white and black smoke were up-blown into the grey skies.

An empty taxi stopped at the public house at the corner of Hillmarton Road, and the man went in for a drink. She waited until he came out again and then engaged him.

It was all extraordinarily undramatic.

In a letter she had received from Angus he told her he had procured her ticket for Venice, booked her passage, and that Miss Proctor had her boxes packed, addressed and corded in the hall.

Mrs. Fellowes and the Professor would be enchanted to have her.

It was pleasant to be organized, to let one's mind lie fallow.

To-night she would be on the sea, and then the train, and then with Kane in the Venice she remembered so curiously vividly in her very early days; and then perhaps her personality would function again and cast off this queer, close-fitting state of suspended animation that was not without restfulness and peace.

London looked very beautiful even to her rather indifferent eyes as she drove through it; the sky had lightened and lightened until it was more silver than grey, with a pallid sun riding shrouded behind it like a

radiant moon, and to the colourless beauty the stiff limbs of the leafless trees seemed to rear themselves with stark beauty; the houses behind their conventional railings lay crouched in enchanted sleep; their drawn blinds peered through the trellis of the trees like shut eyes.

"London is beautiful," she thought, without regret at leaving it or pleasure at regaining it.

When the taxi turned into the square something in her awoke like a spring released or a pendulum touched: her old anxieties and affections flooded back on her and drowned the drowsy acquiescence that had been hers.

She jumped out of the taxi briskly and ran up the steps.

The little butler opened the door instantly—he must have been behind, and she found her hand gripped.

"Aw! Miss Fannie!" he choked. "Miss Fannie!"

"Now!" she warned cheerfully, "Now! no heroics!"

"They're in the drawing-room," he said. "And Mr. Ripon."

She frowned at that, and at him.

"Why?"

"They're as thick as thieves. He's been here every day."

She stood with her foot on the bottom step, her dark eyebrows contracted a little, her lips pressed tight together.

"And Mr. Reid?"

"The place is full of flowers he sent. They came last night, but he hasn't been near. They don't want him. Miss Proctor and that lot. I know that."

She could see her boxes corded and labelled as Angus had said in his letter. She went up another step and then turned back; at that moment the sun came through, a little pale lemon wisp creeping through the glass above the massive front door. It went licking languidly along the polished floor, and seemed to curl up in the centre of a Persian rug. She watched it for a second, and the little Punchinello butler watched her; then, without any further words, she went quietly upstairs.

She was glad Angus Reid was not there, immensely glad. The knowledge caused a quiet happiness to coil up in her heart just as the sunbeam had coiled up on the rug, diffusing brightness all round it.

She had an empty mind for Angus Reid; the slate of her impression was wiped clear for him to write on. During the week of lonely hours she had jettisoned her prejudices against him and her obvious attraction to him. She believed, in her curious ignorance of human psychology, that she was ready to start again as if they were two people meeting for the first time. In her sublime lack of knowledge she ignored the deep indentations he had made on her imagination, even on her character and beliefs.

Once you have started a relationship there is no such thing as starting all over again. That is the only really tragic thing about marriage and the only really satisfactory thing about friendship.

She opened the door of the drawing-room very quietly and went in.

The room seemed to lift itself to her mind in welcome much more than its occupants. They sat quite

still, blind and oblivious, but the dapple of firelight and pale sunshine on familiar objects was like the outstretching of friendly hands. Her clear voice broke a little:

“Well, my dears!”

Yet when they gathered round her, petting her with their hands and their words, making much of her, she was aware that they had not that clear, whole-hearted welcome the room had held. There were reservations.

She nodded coolly to Tom Ripon. He stood very erect, very white, quite unreadable. She kept him out of the atmosphere of welcoming consciously, drawing Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and little Mr. Cole to her as mental protection in all sorts of little feminine ways, and thereby becoming disquietingly aware of all sorts of new contours in their make-up.

“Oh! my dear!” said Miss Proctor, “was it very dreadful?”

“It was like a terribly strict school. I made button-holes in men’s shirts and read ‘The Lamp Lighter’ from the prison library.”

Miss Proctor shivered and little Mr. Cole looked at her with tragic eyes. Yet she could not disabuse her mind of the idea that these were mere gestures of friendship and behind it their minds were given passionately to things far removed from her. She was human enough to be disappointed and big enough for it not to make any real difference. She was animated by the old tender, maternal and protective love for them that had always existed.

“I have had no horrible experiences,” she said, “nothing. Everyone was kind to me, kind and curt.

Tell me what you have all been doing. I seem to have been away a long time."

She felt suppressed excitement take an upward leap all round her.

They seemed to glance at Tom Ripon mutely, like children, for permission to tell.

At that moment the telephone went.

"I'll answer it," she said. "I'll answer it!"

"It'll be Angus," Miss Proctor said. Her voice sounded flat and disappointed.

Tom Ripon's brilliant eyes narrowed. They jewelled his face, revealing nothing. His hand clenched and unclenched on the mantelpiece.

"There seems mystery," she challenged, smiling, without glancing at him, and ran downstairs.

The little Punchinello butler gave her the receiver.

"Mr. Reid, Miss Fannie," he said.

She heard Angus's voice with its old commonplace kindness, its evenness.

"Is that you, Fannie? How are you?"

"I'm very well," she said.

"May I come round?"

"Of course."

"May I come round now?"

"Of course."

Her mind seemed to empty itself and fill again quite differently.

They were talking eagerly when she went in, but the voices ceased and the eagerness was immediately hidden.

"Something wonderful has happened," Miss Proctor

said nervously. "We . . . Mr. Ripon thinks it better to tell you when Angus comes."

She knew then quite definitely that her hold on them had loosened. They were not even really very interested.

She looked at Ripon. His eyes met hers appealingly. Their brightness was less apparent; they were sad with an animal sadness like an ignored dog, that moved her in spite of herself. They seemed to say, "Watch this trick. I am doing it for you."

"Why must we wait for Angus?" she said.

The bell went; they heard Angus running up the stairs. He burst in upon their silence.

"Why, Fannie!" he said.

He looked extraordinarily excited, happy, virile. Like a smooth olive-skinned Italian, and his brown eyes laughed in his brown face.

"You look awfully well," he said. "Why! splendid!"

He took her two hands and held them out, and stared at her with his glowing, appraising eyes. He was aware of no one else, whereas no one, until he came, had been really aware of her.

"We are very glad to have her back," Miss Proctor said.

He woke up then. He admitted them rather self-consciously to his notice. Then he saw Tom Ripon. His whole face and pose went quite blank. It was like blinds drawn.

"Hullo, everyone," he said, even his voice sounded different.

She said:

"Something exciting has happened while I have been away, Angus. They were waiting to tell us."

"Nothing has happened yet, dear," said little Mr. Cole. "It has only been arranged, only arranged. I—my book of poems is going to be brought out at last. I never hoped! I never dared hope. Mr. Ripon has arranged with a publisher. He is going to spend hundreds on advertising! My dream is coming true. Think of it, my dream is coming true!"

"And I am to have my audition at the Queen's Hall!" quavered Miss Proctor. "It was all arranged while you were away. Tom wanted it to be a surprise for you. Oh! Fannie, think of it!"

"And I am to have a little florist's business," chimed in Papa Pip. "I've always known I could make a big success of one."

She looked at Tom Ripon. He was standing there staring at her with his hungry, unhappy eyes. He seemed to be saying, "There is my trick. It is the best I can do. The best I can do."

She saw only the beauty of it. Dreams come true! It took her heart and twisted it away from common sense like beautiful music. She submerged her sense of proportion in the sight of their old happy, expectant, rejoicing faces. She was again within the precincts of her fairy-tale world where all things were possible and everything comes true.

"Oh! my dear, my dear!" cried Miss Proctor. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Their happiness was a strong emotion, the room, the very air seemed full of it. She yielded herself to it gladly.

She said:

"Oh! Tom, it is splendid of you! Splendid!"

She knew it for atonement, his whole attitude showed that; but she was too generous to accept it as that. In her imagination, in her voice, it became magnified to a gift.

She found herself crying, but at the same time she felt as if she had left her own personality a long way behind, a little forgotten, ownerless thing, so closely she identified herself with their happiness and excitement.

"Oh! it's wonderful," she said. "It's just wonderful!"

She held out her hands to Tom Ripon emotionally, and he seemed to press his gift into them in a firm hard way as if it were a personal gift to her.

"It's lovely of you," she said. "All these years they've been dreaming. Why! it's like a fairy-tale come true."

"You were at the back of it," Tom Ripon said. "All the time you were at the back of it." His eyes had regained their old queer hard brilliance, but underneath lay nervousness and fear.

"Good Lord! Ripon," said Angus starkly, "you can't do this thing!"

Miss Proctor cried out in a sharp, ugly voice which was as utterly unfamiliar as the expression on her face:

"I knew you'd try and queer it. I told the others so. I knew. I said so, didn't I?"

"Why, Angus!" Fannie expostulated.

He turned to her. He was as she had first known him.

"You mustn't permit this thing. Use your common sense." His voice was sharp, admonishing and yet appealing. It was as if he pleaded with her to grow up and understand, because much, much more depended on her understanding than had ever done before.

"But it's beautiful," she said.

"Can't you see?"

They were all staring at him with pale faces and hostile eyes, and all their thoughts of him were gnarled and twisted with hatred. It showed in their old faces and wrote on them an ugly sadness that she could not bear to look upon.

"I don't see what it has to do with you," Tom Ripon said. "It is my money that is assuring their success."

"Common humanity . . ." began Angus hotly. He looked right into Fannie's eyes.

The old people moved nearer to her. They seemed to be crowding Angus out of the room, out of her thoughts.

"But all their lives they've been waiting just for this," she exclaimed without anger, only with a vivid hurt surprise that he could not see how unbelievably beautiful it all was.

"Ripon's taking advantage of them," Angus said hotly, and once more his ridiculous commonplace honesty betrayed him; he saw the surge of it carry her right away from him on a wave of the old undisguised antagonism; the common footing there had been slipped away, the old temperamental chasm between

the idealist and the realist yawned tremendously between them. He made one desperate snatch at her across it.

"Fannie, I simply can't explain to you here."

"How do you know we won't succeed?" Miss Proctor flung at him. "Is that what you're afraid of? It isn't your money that'll be lost if we don't. Oh! Fannie, don't listen to him!"

"There's nothing to explain," said Fannie coldly, quietly. "Everything I see beautiful you see ridiculous or fantastic; and this is just one thing more we see totally differently. I believe they will succeed. Why shouldn't they? Why shouldn't they?"

"You leave me nothing else to say." He was very quiet; he turned to Ripon. "I'll go to your rooms and wait for you," he said.

Miss Proctor flung round on Ripon.

"You won't let anything he says make you go back on us?"

"Anything he says will only strengthen me in my original intentions," Ripon reassured them.

III

Tom Ripon came to the point at once.

He said simply and crisply:

"You cooked your goose with the lot of them."

Angus would have given much to hit him across his smiling face.

"What is your game?" he countered quietly.

"Fannie." Ripon sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Fannie, if you want to know. D'you think I care a damn about the rest of them?"

"You beast."

"I know what you want to do, my restrained and logical friend. You want to make a holy mess of me and the room and everything. I'm not sure you won't do it. Rather an appealing story to take to Fannie. I've met your sort before; they're a darn sight worse over a war or women than my sort. Look at things with your passion for common sense. Whatever you do can't stop me giving those idiots the send-off they've been waiting for all their lives, and you can't stop Fannie seeing me as a hero and loving me for it. The more you object the more heroic I look. It's rather a neat situation. I had to do something pretty spectacular to wipe out the rather unfortunate impression I made over the prison affair. As a matter of fact, during the week she's been there I've realized that I want Fannie more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. The things I've wanted I've had so far. Wait a minute! Let me finish! I don't care a damn about Papa Pip, the poet, or the whole bunch of them, but they were the only means I had to get back to Fannie, and I'll pour money out on them, rivers of it if necessary. Wait a minute! I've nothing to fear from frankness with you. I want to marry Fannie. She'll round off my life. It's ragged and ugly. I want that girl. She's wonderful. It's a . . . it's what that little Cole chap calls a *beau geste* of mine. It got her back like a bird. I'm going to see this thing through with loud music. That's my scheme. I've got Fannie O'Rane eating out of my hand. I want

her for my wife. All right, hit out, my friend. It'll make your case a darn sight worse than it is."

"My God! . . ."

"Hold a minute. I'm not handicapped by any conventional gentlemanly qualms or anything like that. I'm out for what I want. I know all you were going to spit out about the cruelty to the old people, broken dreams and all that. I tell you plainly I don't care. It's a means to an end. They're a means to an end. Everything I do from now on is going to be a means to an end . . . Fannie. I've only got my foot in with this . . . but the rest of me is going to follow. Fannie's going off to-morrow morning. She won't open your letters. You're done. If I've any trouble I'll tell her the thing I found out from O'Rane's lawyer . . . That you're supporting and educating the whole tribe. That'll touch the O'Rane pride like a knife. I've got my cards ready to play. I don't care whether they're dirty cards or not. I'll play 'em to win my game. Fannie's training has made her soft and blind. I can win her through that. It's the only way I can win her. There's one side of her shrinks from me and the other isn't awake. I've heard you say she's living in a fairy-tale. It's the truth. You tried to drag her out. The thing to do is to get in too. I'm in. Ever since I broached this thing to the old people I've been the family pet."

"Haven't you any imagination? Good Lord! Ripon, apart from all of us, you can't break their dreams. They're all they've got to keep 'em sweet and clean and sane, and they're old; why, they've all of them got one foot in the grave. You can't do this

ugly thing. It's worse than destroying a child's faith. Have some pity, man! I couldn't say it in front of them."

"I know all you were going to say and I agree with all of it. It was the only thing to make Fannie accept and tolerate me, and I had to get back somehow. You've broken her dreams all right, family unity and all that. D'you think she doesn't bear you a grudge?"

"I don't think that enters into it."

"You know damn well it does."

They glanced at each other.

"Look here;" Angus was temperate because of his sudden fear for Fannie, "what good would it do to tell Fannie? Apart from the caddishness of it what earthly good would it do?"

"If I thought it would do the slightest good, Reid, I shouldn't hesitate, but for the moment I agree with you, it does nothing. It achieves nothing. Look here, I *want* Fannie. Get that into your mind. I'm going to have her. I'm not handicapped by any little merry gentlemanly instincts. In my own way, and it's a way you don't understand any more than if I were an Eskimo, I love Fannie. I can't see the slightest good in life without her. I'm afraid of life without her. It's ugly and meaningless. If I get her I'll be good to her. That surprises you, but I will. She'd be happy mothering me, and God knows I need mothering. She's a lady. You don't know how I worship ladies. Why should you? All Fannie's little ways . . . the way she keeps herself . . . it's poetry to me."

"Good Lord! you talk like a woman!"

Ripon laughed without a trace of self-consciousness, the glitter had come back to his eyes, the restlessness to his gesticulating hands. He began to walk up and down, up and down the expensive, sombre room.

"I don't care a jot for anyone in this world except Fannie."

"But those old people have got their lives to finish out. It's such an ugly thing you're doing, Ripon. Haven't you any imagination?"

"Lots," laughed Ripon.

Angus Reid clenched his hands.

"If you break their dream there's nothing left for the three of them."

"I'll keep them. I swear I'll keep them."

"It isn't the point."

"It's the only point that interests me."

"Let me explain."

"Explain away," said Ripon.

Angus pleaded for Papa Pip, for Miss Proctor and Mr. Cole. He leant forward a little in his chair with his hands clasped and his eyes following Ripon as he walked up and down, up and down. Ripon stopped him with a gesture.

"Look here," he said, "you plead very well. It's quite useless. They haven't any right to those dreams. If they hadn't been artificially protected they'd have been broken long ago. Try and get it into your head that I know they must be broken and I don't care. . . . I'm going to walk over the bits to Fannie. That's all that matters. If you interfere in any way I shall tell Fannie how much they've all got a year, and what you're doing for Kane, Judy and Pat. I think in

her present reaction against you she'd almost marry to be free of the obligation. Keep out of it. Keep out of it." He paused and grinned. "I don't know that it would be altogether a bad thing to let you do what you want to. Come on then!"

Angus slammed the door as he went out.

He dare not trust himself another moment in the room.

The next morning Fannie left London for Venice and Kane without his having seen her.

IV

Angus went up to see Marjorie Money Penny at Hampstead.

He told her of Tom Ripon's latest scheme seated over the fire. She listened quietly, watching him covertly, impatiently, with her brilliant blue eyes. That was the keynote of her present attitude towards him, an adult impatience towards childishness.

"Of course," she said, "it's all a bid for Fannie O'Rane. She's rather lucky to have a man want to marry her at all."

He raised his head in a queer, jerky way and stared at her in amazement.

"In Heaven's name, Marjorie, why that attitude?"

Her irritation boiled over.

"My dear Angus, it's all very well to live up in the clouds . . . if you can, but the rest of the world doesn't regard prison in the same way as presentation at Court. I can't explain what I mean exactly, because I'm not clever, but it seems to me that you regard

Fannie O'Rane's exploit in exactly the same indulgent way as the public judges a great actress's immorality, a sort of divine licence. I simply cannot see the sense in you. If you do a thoroughly mean, rotten thing, like pinching things from a big shop, you've done it whether you're a queen or whoever you are. I should like to say here and now that I haven't understood you for quite a long time. You're not the same, Angus. You say no one knows of this unfortunate episode. I wonder what your mother . . . or my mother would say if they knew."

"I know I've changed in all sorts of ways, Marjorie. I've changed so much that I wouldn't care if they did know; I mean, I should be sorry for them, but not sorry for myself or Fannie, because it wouldn't alter us."

"I suppose she's very pretty," she said, without any particular malice; "that's at the bottom of it."

The new maid brought in tea, drew the curtains, shutting out the wind writhings of the bare branches, and they were together in the low-ceilinged little box of a room.

"Why do you come up here to see me?" she challenged quietly.

"For selfish reasons. Because I'm so darn miserable and perplexed and up a gum-tree generally. You simply don't see the pathos of it, you know, Marjorie—Miss Proctor like a young girl on the eve of her wedding. I went to see them all in their rooms yesterday. They tolerate me."

"Then why do you go?"

"Because I just can't stay away, that's the honest truth."

She tapped her eternal knitting needles against her teeth.

"Look here, Angus. It isn't any good my pretending to understand, because I frankly don't. You couldn't expect anyone to understand who'd known you in the old days. You aren't the same man," she said. "Even mother noticed. She said the other day: 'What's the matter with Angus, Marjorie? He seems all of a dither when he comes here lately.'"

"I've talked to Fannie about you a lot."

"If you've talked to her about me as much as you have talked about her to me——"

"You're not angry, Marjorie?"

"I'm fed up," said Marjorie; "that's the plain, honest truth."

He lit a cigarette and spoke judiciously.

"I think I understand, Marjorie. I've known you so many years. I suppose I imposed on the friendship. We seemed to think alike in the old days. At first, when I didn't understand the O'Ranes, it was such a tremendous relief to come up here and talk my troubles out. I take advantage of it. You've been infinitely patient with me."

"I haven't," said Marjorie quietly. "If I had been you could have kept on coming. That's just it, Angus, for such a long time now I've been so impatient. I've hardly been able to conceal it, and when you've gone I've been so furious with myself for keeping it all in. It seems to me that you've become soft, and I hate soft men. I hate them. I think it's perfectly absurd of

you to spend your money secretly on the O'Ranes like you do."

"But if we all took that attitude"

"If we all took that attitude we should know exactly where we were. You're up to the neck in O'Raneism, Angus, that's the fact of the matter, and you've lost the faculty of seeing straight. You keep writing to this girl and writing to her, and making a perfect fool of yourself, and getting no answer. Haven't you any pride?"

"Not the sort you mean."

"What sort do I mean?" countered Marjorie quietly.

"The pride that simply must have recognition of its love even to exist."

"Why did you tell me about the prison? You needn't have?"

"Fannie asked me to."

She opened her blue eyes wide; an expression of distaste crossed her face. "She wants to meet you when she comes back, and she thought it more honest that you should know first."

"Is everyone to know?"

"No one in the world knows, or is likely to, except Ripon, the old people, Gladys Kerr, who happened to be there, and myself, and one can rely on the discretion of those people. It is as if it had never been. I don't know why she insisted so particularly on your knowing."

"I think I do," said Marjorie. "I suppose she isn't shielding anyone, Angus? I suppose she really did steal those things?"

"As far as I know she did really take them and she is not shielding anyone," Angus answered steadily.

Marjorie nodded her head.

"Well, she's quite right," she averred. "I don't want to know her. Even if she was shielding someone I still wouldn't want to know her. I don't want to know anyone who has been to prison. I'm very sorry, Angus. Please don't look at me like that. I am not at all unique."

"She wants a woman friend so frightfully badly. You don't know how curiously lonely and isolated she is. When she comes back at Christmas it will all be so different. She's leaving Kane in Paris with Bobbie Buttons' mother. Judy and Pat will have got their own interests and the old people their own home."

"She'll have you and Tom Ripon," said Marjorie antagonistically. "Besides, I wouldn't want to know a girl who hadn't pride enough to keep a man turned down after he turned her down. I'm very sorry, Angus, but you see she hasn't bewitched me."

"But it's other people who have made Tom Ripon what he was at that moment. You must see that."

"But I don't see it."

"It was an involuntary movement, that backing out of the wedding. Honestly and truthfully, Marjorie. It was as a sort of instinctive reflex action, the result of all the kicks and curses life has meted out to him. This getting her through his kindness and benevolence to the old people is far more dastardly, far more indefensible. It's utterly mean, utterly contemptible. It's calculated, the other wasn't. She knew that. She's wonderful the way she sees into people's hearts."

"She doesn't see into his heart over this."

"Because she believes in fairy-tales; because with all her heart she believes that he can realize their dreams for them."

"They all want waking up," said Marjorie. "Angus, I suppose you're going to try and marry her?"

"Yes, I'm going to try and marry her."

She nodded her head a little. Her eyes were very hard and bright.

"I wish something would wake you up too. Bobbie Buttons I understand, but you!"

"I'm going to fight Ripon."

"I thought you were. Of course time will prove you right about the old people."

"He's making his running every day with letters telling her what arrangements he is making; and the old people are making his running for him with tales of his wonderful goodness and generosity."

"I suppose it makes friendship impossible, but I hope he wins."

"It does make friendship rather impossible," he said quietly. "You see, this thing matters to me frightfully; more than I ever thought anything could matter in this world in the old days. I wish you understood."

"I'm sorry I can't," she answered crisply.

Later her mother wandered in vaguely.

"I went up the hill. They told me Angus was here."

"He's gone. He asked me to say good-bye to you. I don't think we shall see any more of him."

"Why not, Marjorie?"

"He's in love with that O'Rane girl."

Mrs. Moneypenny looked with passing intentness at her daughter's bent golden head.

"I thought they were rather a peculiar family?"

"They're not our sort."

"I used to think you rather liked Angus Reid, dear?"

"I used to think so myself, but I haven't since this girl got hold of him."

"I hope she's not objectionable in any way?"

"She's just . . . odd."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Moneypenny, "perhaps it's just as well. You don't know what sort of meals to ask those sort of people to, or what they'll come looking like, or what the maids will think. It seems a pity. He was a nice boy."

v

Kane wrote to Angus. Her letters were like herself, vivid, impulsive, chaotic, a rush of highly-coloured, unassorted thoughts.

"Fannie goes about in a state of dim happiness. She only emerges to harden up when I try and speak of you. Every single day there's a letter from that frog creature, Ripon. I know you can't do anything, but the snag is neither can I. Fannie's aloof as she always was. I can't even guess what she's thinking. She isn't facing things, I know that. She's sunk herself in the happiness of the old people. She sees you as a brute deliberately withholding happiness from them. She won't, simply won't, let herself face the

problem of their not realizing their dreams, but losing them permanently. Of course there are their letters, simply bubbling with rejoicing, and his to keep her going. We shan't be back till well after Christmas, and then Fannie will leave me with Bobbie's mother. Couldn't I think about a trousseau in Paris? I know it isn't exactly a year; but we've been apart long enough to know that we'll never, never want to be apart again."

He wrote and told her she could buy her trousseau in Paris.

He rarely saw Robert de Bouton. He was working steadily, playing tennis and golf to keep fit in his free hours. His play was under consideration. He was busy on a novel.

Angus let Kane write and tell Bobbie his decision. The little man rushed over to see him in frantic excitement. After he had finished rhapsodies, he came down to earth.

"You're looking old, Angus."

"I feel it."

"Of course," said Bobbie sympathetically. "The Bolshevik swine. I met Mr. Cole in the reading-room of the British Museum the other day. His book comes out next month. It's a damn shame, you know, Reid! He showed me a letter from Fannie eulogizing Tom Ripon."

"Papa Pip's little shop is failing, Bobbie, already. It's pitiful to see the old chap's face. Ripon's his chief customer, but that isn't trade. Papa Pip can see his dream disintegrating before his eyes. And those other two dreams will explode with a bang. Oh! I hate to

see it! I hate to see it! Papa Pip is creeping over to my side, but it's too late! He came here alone the other day to ask me if it was really too late to stop the publication of Cole's book and Miss Proctor's audition."

"He did!"

"He sat there, where you are sitting, turning his hat round and round in his fingers and keeping on repeating: 'It is happier to go on believing,' and getting no farther. We couldn't be frank with each other. It wasn't possible. He didn't want to point to the death of his own dream. He didn't want that brought home. I said: 'Do you write to Miss Fannie?' and he answered evasively: 'Well, I haven't had anything to write about lately.' You know the look he used to wear . . . always as if there was something jolly just round the corner and he was on his way to it. That's gone."

"What's Ripon's game when all the dreams are broken?"

"I think he'll go to his innocent accomplice and point out the necessity of salvage. He'll tell Fannie the exact state of affairs; that Kane and Judy and Pat are dependent on me, that she owes the financing of the holiday she is on to me. He'll offer to make a home for the old people . . . and he'll get her."

"You can't do anything?"

"Can't you see how utterly my hands are tied?"

"It's a rum situation," said Bobbie.

He sat smoking and blinking with his vivid whimsical eyes.

"Ripon is brilliant in the way he has managed to

get Fannie and himself apparently together in their beliefs and illusions, and now in their disillusionment."

"I believe she likes you, but Fate and lately Tom Ripon have always put you in opposition to each other. The mater's crazy to have Kane with her in Paris. I won't get married for years. Mother's never had a daughter to play about with and take shopping. She'll keep her for ages. Kane says the Professor thinks they'll be on their way back about February. Cole told me Miss Proctor has been practicing seven hours a day. They came in the other evening and found her in a dead faint."

"It makes me absolutely see red. I think Papa Pip sees the game, Ripon's game. It was rather curious the other evening. He more or less said that when Ripon had broken all their dreams he'd see that they were all absolutely destitute and forced to go back, dependent on Fannie. He doesn't want to, he doesn't want to lose his independence. He's quietly hunting for a job."

"Game old chap."

"He doesn't know the true financial state of affairs, of course; but he knows that Fannie can't afford to keep them, and that Ripon will step forward and offer them a home. He's no notion of being swept back. He knows they're only pawns in the game. He's pretty shrewd, shrewder than the others, I think."

"Somebody ought to shoot Ripon."

"It's almost the only thing I can do to him which won't help him with Fannie."

"Kane says Fannie is a delightful companion, and

Mrs. Fellowes adores her, but you never get under her guard. She's got extraordinary self-control."

"Pat is doing wonderfully well. I went down to see him last week. Those things—in spite of everything—they make it seem worth while. Judy's awfully happy, too. I think Fannie feels I'm justified by them . . . in a sense. It's one of the few, very few, cards I hold."

Bobbie lit his pipe.

"By the way," he said, "did you see Marjorie Money-penny's engagement? She's engaged to that lawyer fellow with bedpost knobs for ankle bones—that rather elderly guy who was always poking about. They'll just suit each other. Both full of good teeth and horse sense. I'm thankful you escaped."

"I owe it to Fannie," said Angus, smiling.

"D'you ever see Ripon?"

"Not from that day to this."

"But you see the old people?"

"He doesn't go to their shack. He makes them go to him; the gracious overlord touch, my boy."

"Swine," said Bobbie.

"Clever swine though," amended Angus.

Chapter X

I

ANGUS went to see Gladys Kerr many times; with her, in some curious, indefinable way, he found mental peace.

Perhaps it was in her impersonality, an impersonality that had nothing actually indifferent or egotistical about it, but was tense with the desire to help and comfort, but never fretted and frothed itself with useless conjecture or vain regret.

It was like cool, comforting hands laid on the heat of his unhappiness and dismay.

"You are so happy, Gladys," he said to her wonderingly, many times.

"I *am* so happy, Angus," she answered, smiling quietly.

She seemed to radiate her happiness, to draw her comfort from within. He thought, oddly, of some sacred pictures seen in a Catholic school, crude, symbolical: a heart licked with flames. The kindly, hidden warmth touched everyone she came in contact with gently and healingly, and seeing the effect she upheld the hidden, painful source, accepting her suffering almost as a vocation.

She shared Angus's anxiety for the old people without his anger for Ripon; the wings of her pitying

thoughts seemed to hang over them tenderly as she talked. He could see her pale eyes misty with pity.

"It's so brutal."

"I don't know, Angus. There's a sort of strength comes in facing things as they are. It's like clearing away the undergrowth." She paused. "They'll be so much happier afterwards."

"Do you want to go to Miss Proctor's audition? It's next week."

"Are you going?"

"Yes. I'm sending her a big gold basket of yellow roses to be handed up. It's about all one can do, poor old lady."

"I'd like to sit at the back," she said.

"It's awfully difficult, Gladys. If I don't go they'll say I'm unfriendly; if I do they'll say I've come to triumph."

She nodded her head a little.

"I know."

"Bobbie heard from Kane this morning. They won't reach Paris until a month later than expected. Fannie won't be home until about April as things go."

"You haven't had an answer?"

"I write regularly twice a week."

"Do you mention the old people?"

"Never by any chance"

"What about Mr. Cole's poems?"

"They're due next month. Ripon put £3,000 into the publisher's hands for advertising purposes. They've been boomed. He's paying for publication, otherwise they wouldn't have been out so rapidly."

"They're all so old and frail," he said restlessly.

"One wouldn't mind if they were younger. Good Lord! I never thought they'd turn round like they did, full out for Ripon. They used to loathe him. Now I almost believe they'd like to see him married to Fannie. I'm not even sure they won't engineer it. It was a most sickening, incomprehensible *volte-face*."

"You can't blame them," she said quietly.

"You mean they're children?"

"No, I mean they're human."

He talked enthusiastically of Pat. The boy was splendid, so good at sports, so happy. His brown eyes shone, his oval brown face glowed.

"Poor Fannie!" she said.

"You mean the coming back?"

"There won't be any coming back, Angus."

"I'm not afraid."

"I'm quite sure Tom Ripon will tell her the financial position."

"It can't alter things for Judy, Kane and Pat."

"You've paid for this expensive trip of Fannie's."

"I know."

"He'll tell her that."

"I'm quite powerless to stop him or the consequences."

"I know."

"Do you think she'll let me know she knows?"

"I don't know, Angus."

"What a muddle!" he said hopelessly.

"I wish I could help you."

"It helps me to come here," he answered.

It was good to stay for a few hours in the shabby house that seemed to have taken on a gentle dignity,

to see the emotional tenderness with which Philip treated his wife, the reverence.

There was something timeless about her, the eternal madonna, the transparency of her, the patience, the gentleness, that dwelt in her tired blue eyes.

She said to Angus: "It's queer the peace. I don't know where it comes from; I only know it for the peace which passeth understanding."

"How do you mean?" he said.

She looked at him with her grave, considering eyes.

"I don't know that I could explain. I don't know that I could. Since I've lost my outward pettinesses and littlenesses Philip has defied me. I am his little saint. Do you understand? When he praises me . . . when he looks up to me . . . it's like a knife in my heart. I think, if he *knew*! And the desire to tell him comes over me . . . like, like hell, Angus. Do you understand? As I fight I suffer, and that suffering is a sort of narcotic. I go to sleep behind it and find peace. Dozens of times a day I long to free myself by telling the truth, just for a second the price of Philip's broken faith and broken life seems cheap. And every time I resist, the happiness that lies in resisting grows deeper, and I can sink further into it—and the further I am back in it the more strongly my hands and my brain and my sympathy seem to function for other people. Do I explain?"

"You explain most marvellously," he said.

They went to Miss Proctor's audition, and, as she desired, they sat far back.

Angus was rather white, fierce. He said very little.

"I hope to God she won't wear that pale blue frock Kane used to talk about," he broke out suddenly.

The hall was damp, sooty with December fog. It clung to the lips and filmed the eyes like invisible spider webs.

"Her name is on all of the fronts of the buses and in the tube lifts. Ripon must have spent hundreds and hundreds on advertising."

"It will only make people all the more furious," Angus burst out. "They don't like being taken in. Year after year they're taken in over books and plays by advertising."

"We're here to clap," she reminded him.

It was bitterly cold in the great hall. The audience had the reluctant half peevish look of people pulled from warm firesides.

"There's the brute himself," Angus broke in vehemently. "Good God! Look at him smarming everybody! And I can't do anything! That's what bowls me over! I can't do a darn thing to stop his filthy game. My hands are absolutely tied."

"There's Papa Pip and little Mr. Cole," she soothed him tranquilly. "Look, Angus, right in the front. Papa Pip has a bunch of malmaisons. I suppose he's going to hand them up."

"To cover a broken dream. *He* knows. Oh! it's piteous, and that hound 'climbing over the bits to Fannie,' as he expresses it. What's going to be the outcome of it all, Gladys?"

She shook her head.

"Poor little Miss Proctor; she hasn't the faintest conception of present-day technique. I mean some

of the interpretations I've heard! Piano-playing has become a medium of self-expression. They'd strike her as indecent revelations, some of the renderings. Poor little soul!"

A terrible blight seemed to have settled on the hall. The lights shone baldly. There was something oppressive in the hushed whisperings of the audience; they seemed to be fettered by an apathetic boredom. Draughts touched the neck like little cold knives.

"They're bus and tube people most of them," Angus whispered to Gladys. "You can feel them worrying about the fog. They'll never wait till the end of the concert. Even the weather seems working against her."

"This is the hour she's lived for for nearly forty years," Gladys said. "And it's upon her."

"It's going to be stolen from her by Ripon," contradicted Angus. "If it had never come she would always have had it, more wonderful and beautiful with time, to warm herself right up to the very end. Oh! it's a damnable thing he's doing."

The little Punchinello butler from Fannie's house slid into the last seat at the far end of their row. His twinkles were extinguished in a heavy melancholy, his merry eyes brooded gravely. As he caught sight of them his face cleared a little. He came round the back of the seats and stood beside them for a minute.

"This is a bad day, sir," he said. "A bad day."

"I'm afraid it is."

"I mistrust Ripon profoundly, sir. I had reason to even in the old master's day. He's no more honour than a hungry cat with a salmon, sir."

"How's the house?"

"Like a grave, sir. I doubt if this'll see the last of it, sir. Things are breaking up."

"Oh, no!"

"You can tell, sir. In all sorts of little ways you can tell. Miss Proctor's met her Waterloo, you might say, sir, and every Waterloo drags a lot of odds and ends of people down, sir, who weren't nothing to do with it, as you might say."

"I'm sorry you think that," said Angus. "Have you heard from Miss Fannie?"

"Pretty regular. She believes Paradise is opening for Miss Proctor, Papa Pip and Mr. Cole, bless her heart. She's as innocent as a woman story-writer, sir. I used to beg the old master to let 'em go out in the world and find it wasn't all they thought. No good. He never contemplated dying. Every father should contemplate dying regularly. It mayn't be cheery, but it's part of his business."

He went back to his seat and the gloom seemed to deepen.

"I wish she'd come and get it over," said Angus restlessly.

"There she is," said Gladys.

There was a half-hearted clapping. It sounded like the impatient flutter of wings.

Miss Proctor had had her white hair waved for the first time in her life. She wore a grey dress with long squirrel-edged, steel-studded panels.

To all who knew her in the hall she presented the startling unfamiliarity that is the privilege of the bride or the corpse.

"Somebody's asked Granny to play the hymn," said the man in front of them.

"Heaven's above!" said the woman. "*That's* Emily Proctor!"

"I'm going," said the man.

"You simply can't! Wait a minute!"

She adjusted the music-stool. What was actually a bid for poise became an intolerable affectation in the eyes of a disappointed audience. She fumbled mincingly, deliberately.

"Good God! is she going to keep us here in cold storage all night?" fumed the man in front. "Silly old fool!"

Miss Proctor smiled at the audience. It was a blind, tremulous smile of sheer ecstasy, of momentary abandonment to the recognition of a dream, but to her cold, fog-breathing audience it appeared like a little self-satisfied smirk.

"Hates herself, doesn't she?" said the man in front.

She lifted her hands daintily, deliberately, and played the opening bars of Mendelssohn's "Spring Song."

"Jesus save us!" protested the man in front, profanely.

She played evenly, correctly, the music rippled softly under her fingers. She played very, very well, but not for one minute did she get over the platform the shimmer of Spring sunshine or the rustle of beech trees in a Buckinghamshire wood. It was as if she jerked artificial trees with little artificial ribbons. The audience received it almost as if it were an actual demonstration and not aural suggestion. Their whole

attitude betokened conscious inability to be taken in. It was very curious.

Their faces seemed like bricks building solidly a wall of polite indifference through which her music trickled like the echo of a thing that is already dead.

"One can feel it!" said Angus below his breath.

The clapping rose light, fluttering, intolerant. It was like grown-ups impatiently clapping a child in order that it may get the thing over quickly and eagerly and set them free.

"McDowell's 'Sea Pieces,' " whispered Gladys. "Hark at Ripon clapping. Why doesn't he stop! Why doesn't he stop! It only points the thing out."

"D'you think he cares?" whispered Angus fiercely.

He looked down the row of dead faces to Fannie's little butler. His head was sunk on his chest, the absurd curve of his absurd nose seemed to hang on it.

The consciousness of failure spread and spread.

Emily Proctor must know, sitting there at her piano.

The colour and the shape faded from her dream.

They were killing it, those fog-shrouded people out there; killing it with their silence that was worse than laughter. It seemed to spread like damp fungus to kill her music as it grew. It seemed to creep over her mind, killing it, to creep over her eyes, misting them.

Her old throat contracted horribly, her hands grew like warm velvet; they seemed to clog the keys.

She knew she had failed.

"She knows," whispered Angus to Gladys.

"She could not help it," her voice quivered; he saw her eyes wet with tears.

He gripped her hand; the grip seemed to unite them

in common pity, in common affection for the silly, pathetic old woman at the piano.

The clapping rose like a tired sigh. It half-lived for a minute in the fog-laden air.

People got up and went out, from every corner of the hall some rose and went out, and in their empty places they left the glaring admission of failure till the place seemed illuminated with it, reeking with it.

"I don't think I can stick it," Angus whispered. "It's worse than I thought."

"If we go it will only be two more empty places," Gladys whispered.

"The pity of it!" Angus said. "The pity of it."

The little butler came up to them in the interval.

"If I couldn't smoke now I couldn't stick it," he said. "That's the truth. She must know what they're thinking. Even I can feel it! They're thinking she's a conceited old fool. They'd like not to clap, but they've had their tickets given to them. Hopes and ambitions in old folks, they don't get sympathy; they're like measles and whooping-cough, they belong to youth and you're not supposed to get 'em. Poor, silly, old dear!" he said. "Poor, silly, old dear!"

Yet none of them could gauge the sick dismay that filled Emily Proctor's heart, nor was it indicated in her mien. All her life she had worshipped in her simple, harmless vanity at the shrine of her dream, always she had been able to turn from real life to it. She had erected it so that it blocked all roads that lay beyond to-morrow and hid them from her sight. It had been a soft and secret refuge from reality. It had stood between her and that contemplation of the

future that is so terrible for the helpless, untrained, unprovided-for female. Now with terrified eyes she saw old age across the powdered debris of her broken dream. Down the long road of life revealed to her, her sick, stumbling mind glimpsed the message of the pitiless, inexorable years. There was nothing in them, nothing but a crawling journey down an empty road that led nowhere.

The only self-revelation that is merciful or even useful is the self-revelation that comes while we are yet young enough to build up a more feasible delusion.

"Papa Pip, now Miss Proctor," Angus murmured. "The sacrifice of the innocent to establish an unjust reign."

Miss Proctor rose and bowed.

The concert was over.

The light, the fog, the boredom had deepened. The seats reserved for the musical critics were empty long ago. Each empty seat seemed a recorded judgment. They rose up silently to mock the little bowing figure.

Flowers were handed up; Papa Pip's bunch of mal-maisons, Angus's own basket of roses, a magnificent basket of purple orchids from Tom Ripon, a great sheaf of lilies-of-the-valley from Fannie.

They added to the desolation of it all . . . the decent cloaking of decimation that had taken place there before their eyes.

The hall cleared like magic; everybody had been ready and eager to go. They vanished like leaves before the wind.

"We'd better go," Angus said.

Outside they saw Tom Ripon help Miss Proctor into

a magnificent limousine. An attendant followed with her floral tributes; a few passers-by stopped to stare.

It was all unutterably pathetic.

"It's a hearse," said Angus harshly. "The flowers accompany a dead dream."

They stood back in the doorway and watched Papa Pip and Mr. Cole follow and get into a less elaborate car. There was not room for all the flowers in Miss Proctor's car, so the lilies went in with the two old men.

They wondered, watching, what absurd, pretty dreams she had cherished about this departure after the concert; people pressing forward to shake hands perhaps, to beg for a flower. God knows what gaudy decking her secret dream had had before they broke it for her; the busy accumulation of empty years devoid of all emotion save that which went to its joyous designing and to keep her heart fragrant, happy and blindly hoping as the heart of a child.

They saw her face for a minute, the hopeless blindness of her dry eyes.

II

That evening Miss Proctor came to Angus in his rooms.

She had changed back into her own clothes, but her hair still waved softly, giving her a slightly foreign aspect.

Angus had just completed the purchase of farm land adjoining his mother's estate. He laid the deeds aside and looked at her curiously and kindly.

"Can I do anything for you, Miss Proctor?" he said.

"I've been an old fool," she answered.

He could only wait. He waited quietly and courteously.

"Can't you save Mr. Cole and Papa Pip from finding themselves out?" she said. "That's what I came to you about. I've been to Tom Ripon. He wouldn't listen. He was quite frank. He explained his reasons for giving us our . . . our heart's desire. He never explained before. He just wants Fannie. We were incidental. The emotional stepping-stones. Of course, he was right. He said: 'You've had your big chance, and you didn't pull it off. Whose fault is that? Not mine!' Of course, he's right. I said: 'Do you think Mr. Cole's poems have a chance?' He said: 'Not an earthly, but he'll have his chance, like you.'" She paused. "Were you there today?"

"Yes."

"Then you saw what I made of my chance."

"It's all too late," he said very quietly.

"I was afraid it was." She rose to her feet. She looked older, frailer. "I've been an old fool," she said. "I owe you an apology. You saw clearly what would happen. It was just hideous vanity. One is lonely without it, that is the dreadful part, Angus. Already I miss it. I would give anything to get it back. I was never lonely with my old vanity, and now it is gone and there is a curious emptiness. I wanted to spare Papa Pip and little Cole that emptiness."

"I think Papa Pip has felt it a long time," Angus said.

"We're all part of Tom Ripon's little game and we've lent ourselves to it. We didn't give him any peace until he used us. We're not going back to be his pensioners. Not if we starve, we're not going back."

"How do you mean?"

"Didn't you know that was part of the plan?"

"Whose plan?"

"Tom Ripon's. Back to *his* sanctuary when we're disillusioned and penniless, and we're nearly both. *Then* he'll write to Fannie and tell her our condition and offer to keep us all in the house of dreams if she'll marry him, and Fannie will marry him in one of her impulsive waves of pity and love for us. I know. I know how he'll write it and how she will read it. It's all part of a scheme, but I'm *not* going back. I'm *not* going back."

"I see," he said.

"Can't you stop his succeeding?"

"You know I can't," he paused. "Besides, he has even stronger cards to play than the ones you know of."

She clenched her hands.

"We must all stand together, Papa Pip, Mr. Cole and I. All for one and one for all. We've been together so many years. It's more terrible to lose your self-respect when you're old than when you are young. We mustn't lose the last remnant of ours. It's worth fighting for. I am going to find music pupils."

"I think it would be the best possible thing you could do. Will you let me put some advertisement in for you?"

She looked at him. Her eyes filled with the slow, difficult tears of old age.

"I've worked against you all the months Fannie has been abroad with Professor and Mrs. Fellowes," she said. "I hated you because of your common sense. All my letters have been eulogies of Ripon I want you to know before you do anything for me."

"It doesn't make any difference," he said, smiling. "Besides, I know."

They looked at each other. She clasped and unclasped her hands.

"What will happen? What will happen? Can't you go out and see her?"

"And take a tale of your failure to prove myself right? Would it be wise? What other tale could I tell? I've written twice a week ever since she went."

"And had no answer?"

"And had no answer. I do not even know whether she destroys my letters or reads them."

"But you're not going to let Tom Ripon have her?"

"Not if I can help it, but I don't know that I can. To storm the fort would be to achieve permanent defeat. It is only in stories love is won by force; in real life it is gained by common sense. Do you think it is easy waiting for the other man to move first?" A wave of red travelled swiftly up to the very roots of his hair, his brown eyes shone angrily. "Every single thing that a normal man's normal interests would lead him to do are fatal in this case, that's what's so odd about it. I ache to go and knock Ripon down, and if I did I'd knock him straight into Fannie's ignorant, compassionate arms; both he and I know

that. He's tried to egg me on to do it. Your success would have aided me better than your failure. Even you are tied; you can't write and abuse Tom Ripon to Fannie now. Not now you've failed. She'll only say it's personal disappointment and ungenerous, and it will incline her heart to him all the more. You can't turn on him now or you bind her sympathies the closer. Oh! it's a horrible position. He's got us all trussed up . . . harmless!"

She nodded her old head sadly.

"I'm sorry, boy. It was all self-interest. It made me blind. It made us all blind."

"It wasn't your fault, Miss Proctor. You saw the chance of a dream of a lifetime being realized. You wouldn't have been human if you had done otherwise."

"If I can ever help you," she said. "If I can ever help you, you know I will."

He took her cold, dry little hand and held it in his two strong, young, warm ones.

"I am sure you will, he said genially, gently. "I'm sure you will."

III

After the audition Tom Ripon dropped all pretence of interest in the three old people. He neither sought them nor sent for them. His name, which had filled their letters to Fannie, dropped out of them. Yet they dare not write adversely of him, lest her quick sympathy and sense of fair play should catch fire for him after their recent eulogies. Ripon guessed this and allowed himself no fruitless fear of them. Into his

own letters to Fannie he allowed to creep a very faint, hurt disappointment, barely insinuating that they represented their failure and vented it on him; their own letters bore this impression out, and Fannie's replies to Tom were kinder and more gentle in consequence; more and more he implied that the offset against such base ingratitude was only found in her own gratitude and more and more she found herself impelled to express it; until she took the attempted realization of her pensioners' dreams as a personal gift, which was what he aimed at. With it grew an accompanying sense of obligation which he fostered and added to with cunningly wrought phrases, creating a curiously artificial but intimate web of atmosphere between herself and him.

He never made any further inquiries about Papa Pip's tiny business as the months slipped by; in this he worked in accordance with a deliberate plan. The paint grew dirty, and the short tenancy worked itself out and Papa Pip did not renew it. One morning the shutters were up, and the next morning men were painting it violet and silver, and writing "Violet" across the tiny shop front, that blouses of a less shy and retiring character might bloom flamboyantly beneath. It was all part of a preconceived scheme of Ripon's, but Papa Pip grievously upset it by finding a job as an assistant keeper in some little public gardens near by. The wages were small, but the old man was supremely happy; the worry faded from his blue eyes and the smile came back to them. He knew where every bulb was planted under the frost-bound earth; he soon knew the name of every child who came there

to play; he shared his lunch with the birds until they came to know him and look for him. It was his world and he was king. He had kinship with it all.

Little Mr. Cole's book of poems was issued. Some of the critics were angry and some sarcastic, and some dismissed him in two lines. The book, for all the money lavished upon it before publication, had the same fate as any other small, expensive book of indifferent verse. The great noise he had thought to see them make in the world never came. The publisher, who had received him with flattery and fair promise before the book was issued, because of Tom Ripon's cheques, ceased to be in when he called.

It took him weeks to realize, and the realization came, grey and old and broken, shuffling from behind a door in his imagination, behind which had always dwelt golden glory, high fame and signal honour. It took him time to realize that behind that door was eternal emptiness, and that this broken, shuffling grey thing that was knowledge of the truth would companion him for evermore.

They were so utterly tender, so wonderful to him, those other two, during those days; and their sympathy was silent and yet lived and helped them more than it helped him; so that they drew right away from their own self-pity and wounded pride and were filled instead with the steadying, levelling consciousness of being part of a community and not separate, suffering, injured entities.

Never, curiously enough, had they been so free mentally or owned so spacious an horizon; always it had

been bounded by the fretful dapple of their unrealized dream.

They lived very frugally, they went without much to which they had been accustomed in the old days, and yet it had an unbelievable and amazing peace and actual happiness. Their independence upheld their courage proudly. It came back almost like miraculously renewed youth.

Every week Papa Pip brought home his meagre salary, and Miss Proctor took it into the markets of Soho and bartered with it cunningly and carefully. She had found a pupil. Three lessons a week at three shillings each. She was filled with that invaluable consciousness of really being necessary to someone. She used her imagination, her rusted housewifely training, to obtain the very utmost value for the little money they had.

And little Mr. Cole prowled miserably in and out the house, departing in little enthusiastic searches for work and returning always somehow older and more depressed. His small face grew white and wizened like the face of a sick child. Then one day he returned jubilant. The woman who answered the personal column on *Mother's Merry Moments* was ill. He had been engaged to answer letters at sixpence each under the *nom de plume* of "Aunt Martha."

It is impossible for anyone who has never known the inside of an editorial staff to realize the extraordinary intimacy and variety of the letters that arrive addressed to the friend that lurks beneath a borrowed name or lives idealized at the head of a column in a thumb-nail sketch. It afforded a marvellous panacea

for Mr. Cole's wounded vanity and swollen egotism, these appeals that came from every quarter of England, to misspelt, wistful outstretchings of loneliness to friendship, the veil lifted suddenly from clean, drab lives in cottage and villa. There came to him a dim, humble wonder which he expressed over and over again.

"How do they stick it? How do they stick it?"

Sometimes a problem too feminine baffled him and he would take counsel with his two old friends, read them bits of letters from "Maisie" and "Violetta" or "Wind over the Moor."

They would sit over the fire, with the bare gas jet flaring away, and listen and advise and wonder at the largeness and the sadness and the quiet endurance of the world, and the impersonality that they brought to bear on the problem would creep over themselves and they would rest awhile in it.

"So many people all doing different things and wanting different things," Miss Proctor would marvel.

Sometimes she cried over the letters; so pitifully many were from girls who faced the possibility of an unwanted baby, frantic, frightened letters. She could not bear to look at these, the hasty writing always seemed to her to run together in little gasps and explosions of terror. Mr. Cole had his instructions from the editor about these: "Always tell them that their mother is their best friend." "But surely I can say more than that." "Yes," said the editor, "we usually begin in those cases: 'My poor, unhappy, little girls.'"

Two days a week he spent at the office bottling real

Jordan water from a cask in the assistant editor's room for christening babies. They charged two shillings a bottle, and some mothers wrote to say that the baby slept through the ceremony and none of the others had. Eventually they discovered some frogs living at the bottom of the cask, so it was banished and they drew their Jordan water from the tap. It was much more hygienic, and the mothers still wrote to say how well their babies slept.

It worried gentle Mr. Cole a little. He remarked timidly to the editor, a crisp young man trained in modern methods, that it seemed rather a shame, a little fraudulent perhaps. "As long as people believe they're getting what they're paying for it isn't fraud," said the editor. When the woman who had answered the personal column of *Mother's Merry Moments* died, they asked Mr. Cole to retain the job permanently. "You're a simple person," explained the young editor; "you believe that black is black and white is white." "Well, isn't it?" "Hardly ever," grinned the editor.

Sometimes he made as much as thirty shillings a week out of his bottling and his answers to correspondents, for to both tasks he brought both sympathy and singleness of purpose. One day the assistant editor, watching him at his work, said, curiously: "Are you making up poetry, Cole?" The gentle little man smiled. "In a way. I sort of wish for every baby a sort of prayer." The assistant editor sighed. "By Jove!" he said, "if you were only the Bishop of London, what an 'ad' you'd make."

So the days slipped by; snowdrops Papa Pip had planted in the biscuit-box danced like slim pierrettes

on the window-sill, the crocuses in the park showed little spikes of violet and yellow, the sharp pale nose of the daffodil broke the earth; then one day when the first mimosa was on sale in the London streets and they sat at their work; Miss Proctor beside the fire darning one of Papa Pip's socks, Papa Pip poring over a Dutch bulb catalogue he had found in the waste-paper box in the park, and Mr. Cole at the table under the gas jet deciding laboriously whether it would be wiser for Anxious Mother "to trim her cot with blue because she really wanted a boy, or pink in case she didn't get a boy, and her friends, particularly her sister-in-law, who had red hair and three girls, should laugh." The door opened and Tom Ripon stood there.

He was in evening dress; against the background of the dark, unlighted passage, his black and whiteness looked like an advertisement.

He gave a little bow and grinned at them.

"Good evening, merry gentlemen," he said; "may nothing you dismay."

He came, he shook hands, smiling, with them all. Miss Proctor said after: "It would be absurd to say I behaved like a poker; I was just not effusive."

That was it. They were none of them effusive, they were not even natural. He had made them somehow not only miserably self-conscious of him, but of themselves. They avoided each other's eyes.

"Won't you smoke?" he said to Papa Pip.

"Thank you," said Papa Pip; "it's not my day for smoking."

"Not your day! By Jove! I never remember you without something in your mouth."

"I know," said Papa Pip.

Tom Ripon glanced at him sharply. The old fellow appeared to have pulled himself together; the vague amiability that had always characterized him was replaced by something he could not quite define, but felt to be a menace to his plans. The old Papa Pip would have been as incapable of refusing a smoke as a child a candy. He looked hastily, searchingly round the room, and, as its utter poverty penetrated into his imagination, the disquiet vanished from his expression; he became once more bland, suave, assured.

"I should have come before," he said.

"Won't you sit down now you're here?" said Miss Proctor a little sharply.

He sat down on the hard windsor chair and looked at the fire balls that eked out the coal in the grate. They seemed to convey to him that last bit of reassurance he required. He said suddenly, throwing the remark at them:

"You must be about sick of this at your age."

"Oh! I don't know," temporized little Mr. Cole.

"Well," said Tom Ripon, "Fannie wants you back."

There was dead silence. Miss Proctor's mending dropped from her fingers, Mr. Cole laid down his pen, Papa Pip drew a long, slow, hissing breath. The constraint that Tom Ripon's advent had wrought between them vanished, without moving they had suddenly become allied against him, where there had been units there suddenly existed complete unity. He must have sensed this in the silence that followed. His bright eyes flickered round their faces, his hands lost

their unaccustomed immobility, and once more spoke flutteringly, impatiently in time with his words.

"Well? Well? Well?"

"Did she send you?" faltered Papa Pip.

"In a sense, yes."

"What sense?" demanded Miss Proctor.

"Good God! she'd have a fit if she saw you living in this hovel in this cut-throat neighbourhood."

"It is clean and they are decent people," said Miss Proctor. "And the markets near make the living very cheap."

"Did she send you?" echoed Mr. Cole.

Tom Ripon looked round the room then, saw clean scrubbed boards and clean scrubbed table, odd chairs glowing from polishing; cheap cretonne curtains at the windows; Papa Pip's snowdrops dancing on the window-sill with a white crinkled paper frill round them; some presage of what was to come assailed him. The place, bare and poor as it was, had that indefinable, unmistakable atmosphere of home. It was a monument of effort, of self-discipline, of unselfishness.

"Do you suppose when Fannie O'Rane comes back to London she could bear the thought of your being here without even enough to eat?" he said.

"How do you know we haven't enough to eat?" demanded Papa Pip truculently. "We're all working; we've all got a job."

He laughed. His quick squirrel eyes went ferreting from one quiet old face to the other. Then sudden anger shook him.

"Hell!" he exploded. "How long d'you think you'll keep your old jobs!"

He saw his slip then, and his anger turned on himself; he had mismeasured their new-found maturity. He saw it suddenly as a definite menace to his own matured plans. He left them so long without succour that they had been forced to succour themselves. He cursed himself for a fool for underestimating their powers and their pluck. They were pawns in a carefully thought-out game. He began to manoeuvre them, but using an intelligence he had never anticipated the need of.

"Do you think she could live on in the house of dreams . . . ?"

"Broken dreams," interrupted Miss Proctor gently. She was looking at him intently, seeingly. It gave him an odd distasteful feeling, as if he were a very vain old man caught suddenly in a big mirror and early morning sunlight.

"Fannie would go mad at the idea of your living here as you are doing."

"Not these days she wouldn't," said Papa Pip. "She's got out of the old rut like the rest of us. You've come to the wrong people, Ripon, the wrong people. Get Fannie if you can, but not through us. We're going to stay here and live our own lives."

"And I hope you don't get her," said little Mr. Cole unexpectedly. "And I don't believe you will."

He stared at them, suddenly thin-lipped, nostrils a little distended; he was bloodless with a sort of driving anger and spite.

"You old fools," he said, "whether you fit in or

not I'll use you to get her." He clenched his hands together. "I've been working, working in my letters, and I've laid well and truly, and you've helped me without knowing it, each of you, you've pleaded my cause for me. D'you think you're going to spoil it all in the end? Not much!"

"Tom Ripon," said little Mr. Cole quite unexpectedly, "we owe you a very great debt. You are the St. George who has freed us from the dragon. Hail, St. George!" He gave him a little ironical bow.

"You broke our dreams," added Miss Proctor. "That's what he means. Don't you understand? Of course, we know why you did it, don't imagine we don't know; but we've been so much, much happier since, free in a way you could never understand. You emptied the road for us. It wasn't easy at first, but every day it's grown easier. We wouldn't go back for anything. We don't want to know that to-morrow is like yesterday. You've been awfully clever, but I don't think you'll get Fannie O'Rane for all your cleverness, because you're up against something you don't understand, and you can't possibly reckon with what you don't understand."

It was odd to watch Ripon. There was something coming through the veneer that they had never seen before, but had always known was there and curiously enough always expected. It struggled through his acquired manners and mannerisms like a naturally wild beast out of gilt and ribbon trappings foreign to it. It was for him they felt dismay at the revelation. They felt that they had always known the other side of him there, but he had not known they knew. Now

he must know; their manner could only register recognition and not amazement.

"You came to ask us to go back to the house of broken dreams," Mr. Cole said gently. "We couldn't go back, Ripon. It isn't any good. Old age leaves us with such few possessions, and self-respect is the greatest and dearest of these. For years and years while we lived on Mr. O'Rane's bounty we lost it. Now we have got it back, and we're going to keep it till we die. It isn't any good, my boy; it isn't any good."

"We're happy here, Tom," said Miss Proctor gently, "happier than we've ever been, and we are disillusioned. You are too young to know the peace there is in that. It isn't a thing to be afraid of. It is a thing to be glad about. It clears your way. It sets you free."

"We're happy," said Papa Pip.

They looked at him with that new, tranquil, clear-eyed impersonality, and he hurled himself against it angrily, as if it were a barrier and he could break his way through with a splutter of words.

"I've had my scheme from the first. D'you think I'm going to have it broken up by three old fools with one foot in the grave . . . like flappers with a latchkey, aren't you? Like the taste of it!" He paused and glared at them furiously, then he rose to his feet and paced up and down the bare floor like a caged thing. It was the oddest thing to see him in his immaculate evening clothes, that were too immaculate, pacing up and down the bare floor and the little quick, hard rhythmic taps his pumps made. He was quite white

now, the milky white of the reddish-haired man. The three old people sat and watched him. Their eyes if anything were pitying, Papa Pip and Miss Proctor beside the fire and little Mr. Cole still at his table with the letter to "Anxious Mother" still unanswered.

"You're not the man for Fannie," Miss Proctor called out suddenly as if she saw a vision. "Even though you get her, you're not the man for Fannie O'Rane. Oh! I can't tell you how, but I know it, I know it!"

"I know it, too!" he said.

He stood there before them, his head a little bent, his bright eyes raking their unhappy faces. He gnawed one of his nails in an ugly, uncouth way. They had never seen him do it, his nails showed no evidence of the old trick, they were too smooth, too polished if anything, and yet they knew quite well that he would look like that doing it. It was one of the temper outlets of which they would have suspected him if they had analysed their old subconscious impressions.

"I know it," he said. "I'm going to be the man for her after we're married . . . I'm going to learn. I can learn anything! You know I can learn anything. All I am I've learnt to be. I want her! You old fossils . . . dry-bones who've forgotten . . . you don't know what that means! I want her! D'you hear that? D'you take that in? Everything I've wanted I've had! I've taken it! Don't sit there staring at me like three mummies."

"This serves no purpose," said little Mr. Cole. "This serves no purpose, and you won't like to remember it after, Ripon."

But Ripon wanted an audience on which to work himself up, his fiercely worked-up rhetoric, his theatricalism served, as it had a thousand times before, to cremate his own self-doubts. It was the only means by which he could jettison them.

"I hoped to find you destitute and starving," he said violently. "That's God's truth. I should have watched you closer. I gave you too long. I thought you were all too old. I meant to go to Fannie . . . an emissary from *you*, with the tale of your woes and the promise of your salvation if she married me. There's no salvation unless she marries me. I'm going to tell her something she doesn't know, something that I've known a long, long time, something that I kept close until I wanted it . . . that Angus Reid had paid for her trip with Kane, and Kane's trip and trousseau and the education of the others. Oh! you're staring, aren't you?"

"I guessed," said Papa Pip. "I guessed."

"Oh! you did, did you? Well, I'm still going to tell her . . . but I've got a new tale. My letters and your letters have paved the way for this as well as the others. I'm going to tell her that you won't go back to the house of broken dreams . . . because I broke them. I'm going to her not as a saviour, but as a pitiful penitent. You hate me because I tried to realize your dreams for you, and now your pride and your hatred of me stand in the way of your comfort and safe old age. I shall describe this room to her in detail. I have lived in such rooms. I have seen terrible tragedies in such rooms. They are graven on my memory. I shall picture it for her."

"We have no hatred of you!" Papa Pip cried. "That's not the reason, and you know it!"

"Of course, I know it, but that is the tale I shall carry . . . arriving unexpectedly in a strange land, a friend from home. Listen! I haven't finished. I know my Fannie! I shall offer to sacrifice myself for you. I shall tell her of my love for her . . . that everything, my whole happiness lies in that . . . and then I shall offer to go right away, to make over enough money to open the house of dreams again and have you all back. I'll do more than that. I'll offer never to return to England again, to remain an exile in a strange land. An exile for love! D'you hear? D'you understand? D'you think she'll let me do it? Every letter you've written has unconsciously prepared the way, my amiable old fools. Didn't you rave about me . . . and then, when all my efforts couldn't realize your dreams for you, didn't you drop me out of your letters as if you fairly hated me? Haven't you treated me damnably in Fannie's eyes? I'm perfectly frank with you because I've nothing to fear now . . . or ever. Anything you say against me will only illustrate your own villainous want of generosity and pique. If you work against me you work for me."

"If you take her you'll take her by trick, because she's an emotional Irish girl," Mr. Cole cried sharply.

"D'you think I care how I get her so long as I get her!"

"No!" exploded Papa Pip violently. "I don't. I'll go across to Paris. I'll see her myself. I'll . . ."

"D'you think they'll carry you to Paris for love?" said Tom Ripon, passionately. "Oh! I'm not setting

out to be a fine character. I don't care a damn what you think of me. Reid, too—he's worked for me without knowing it, getting them all away from Fannie and then humiliating her without consulting her by putting her under an obligation to him. I offer her a way out of that, too. If she marries me she can pay him back. I'm the only person left in her life that needs her. All you others, all of you, you've cast her off. Don't you forget that. You've made her into a woman at a loose end, without a vocation or a future. Don't forget that. I go to her broken and disillusioned . . . by you three! amazed at your ingratitude! Do you see the picture? I offer to relinquish her love in order to make your remaining days peaceful, since you will not take even a crust of bread from me when I am there. Oh! but I shall put it very, very much better than this to Fannie because I shall be inspired and fighting, and I love to fight with words. I cannot fight any other way, I am afraid. The very stars work for me. There is Kane and the atmosphere of the trousseau; Kane who has found anchorage and Fannie who has found none. I don't think there is any doubt of the issue, unless a few months of travel have altered her more than I think possible. It is not the first time she has been abroad, but it is the first time I have been abroad and I do not speak the language. Fannie will have to take me under her protection. She is used to that. I think we shall come back engaged, and if we do we shall very soon be married. You won't be able to say much, 'because I shall have prepared her for the very things you are likely to say and she will expect them. I defy anyone to trump this hand."

He struck an absurd attitude and looked round at them; and he seemed to them not so much absurd as ugly, ugly with an ugliness that insulted their own refinement and good feeling because it must always have been there and they had not chosen to acknowledge it.

"If you really love her," faltered Miss Proctor bleakly. Her voice died away because she realized that he was nothing like the lovers an old spinster knows, the lovers who live in books.

The gas suddenly dimmed. It had been growing dimmer a long time, but they had not noticed.

"A man who behaves like a swine . . ." began little Mr. Cole.

He could not go on because he suddenly saw himself mirrored in the other's fantastic mind, a little windbag of a fellow playing with independence like a child with a new toy.

The gas went out.

"For all your damned heroics I bet none of you have got a shilling for the meter!" Tim Ripon said curtly. "There's one. It's the last you'll get from me."

He flung one on the table. They heard it roll and strike the floor, roll and spin a little.

When he had gone they sat very quiet in the darkness. Then Papa Pip spoke:

"You mustn't cry, Emily, my dear," he said gently.

The name fell on her troubled consciousness like a little caress stilling it. It seemed to herald and inaugurate a new feature in the relationship, a definite deepening of the kindness and understanding and sympathy that had grown between them.

"Someone must go and tell Angus Reid. Tom has gone to Fannie!" she said. "There isn't any time to lose. I don't know that he can do anything, but he ought to know. He ought to be prepared."

"Who is to go?" said little Mr. Cole.

"You'd better go. And borrow a shilling from him for the gas. We'll be sitting here in the darkness thinking. I can't stand it all the evening."

It did not occur to any of them to use Tom Ripon's money.

IV

It seemed hours after that they heard little Mr. Cole darting rapidly upstairs.

They had sat almost in silence awaiting his return.

The moon was risen now; it lay in white mats on the bare floor.

"He wasn't in," said Mr. Cole in the doorway.

Papa Pip's fingers beat a nervous tattoo on the table.

"Surely, surely you should have waited, Cole."

"He's gone away for a day or two and they don't know where he is. It wasn't any good waiting."

Miss Proctor's voice said suddenly in the darkness:

"Oh! I'm frightened! I'm frightened for Fannie!"

Chapter XI

I

OUTSIDE the hotel windows churned the life of Paris; the spume of laughter, the light battering of parrot voices was thrown against their window as they talked.

Fannie O'Rane sat crumpled in a gilt chair; the room was all gilt, Empire period, ormolu and rose du Barry brocade, like the drawing-room scene in a touring comedy.

She had been crying; the handkerchief in her hand was sodden. Her eyes were more surprised than sad, as if tears had been shaken from her to her own astonishment and considerable annoyance.

Just as persistently as the innate histrionism of Tom Ripon gathered the subtle, garnish insincerity of the setting round him, Fannie smoothed it out and rendered it futile as a setting for the atmosphere he sought to achieve, and yet as the hours slipped by he gained ascendancy over her; the starkness of his frankness, the complete discovery of his aims began to make little darting inroads into her emotions; the room seemed to grow oppressively small, boxing them in together in a mental intimacy that was more distressing than physical intimacy; the ruthlessness of his own honesty dragged at hers. His barriers were down. Hers were

still up, and the very consciousness of holding them against him woke her to passionate, surprised, excited recognition of the things that barrier protected.

As he discovered himself to her, so he discovered herself to her; that was the astounding part of it. Bit by bit he dragged her out of the twilight of her own mind into the daylight; so that he had her at last stark in her own sight and still mysteriously veiled to his.

There, under his vivid showmanship, she passed from girlhood to womanhood, and crying aloud his own miracle he saw not hers. As he hammered into her plastic mind understanding of himself she came to self-revelation, darted to it, blind to him and thrilling to herself and all she found there.

Passionately she longed to get away from him undiscovered and turn it over—and yet his mind was bearing down on hers, she knew that; it was circling round her and the circles were becoming smaller and smaller.

“I wanted you,” he said. “There you have it. Shut up with you in the house I wanted you, my lady, and you must have known it.”

“I know it now,” she said; “I did not know it then.”

Her beautiful eyes were wide on him, yet he could not see they did not reflect him but the things he revealed to her.

“I am going to have you,” he said. “One way or another, I am going to have you. All my life I have had what I want. We’ll make a home for the old people, you shall pay Reid back what you owe him, but all those things are incidental; the result of your coming to me. Even in the old days, Fannie, when

your father was alive, I must have wanted you and not known it . . . It's funny that knowledge should come now, like stumbling on the acorn that grew the tree."

She said:

"Angus was right. They won't want to come back."

"They'll have no alternative. What does it matter what they want?"

"It's the only thing that does matter. Angus saw that." She paused. "You haven't any right to make people do what's good and wise for them. It's like imprisoning them, and that's what I've done all my life."

"But you don't want to be under an obligation to Reid? Good Lord! I've made the position clear."

"Over and over again, Tom," she assured him. "Over and over again."

He came closer to her secret then, but like a blind, angry animal lashing round in the dark.

"What the hell's at the back of your mind, Fannie?" he said.

She could have cried it aloud in one word and seen her whole mind lit up in answer.

"I shall sell the house of dreams and all the furniture," she said steadily. "After you are gone, I shall write to the auctioneers to-night. I shall pay Angus back what I owe him personally. Then I shall be free."

"And then?" he queried in a thick voice.

"Then I shall go and live with Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and Mr. Cole and find work."

He stared at her.

"You won't," he said. "You'll marry me."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't, Tom," she said. "Not ever."

He heard that. It rang in his brain, in his ears like a clear bell. It travelled to his nerves and jarred them like a sting, it bit along his imagination, and the veneer and pose that time had given cracked and became a shapeless, thin thing under which his temper squirmed and fretted.

"So that's it!" he spat at her.

"Angus," she said, and looked at him straight and level. "If I had known I would have told you before. I didn't know, Tom, I only suspected . . . and I wouldn't look."

"Love, you mean?" he said.

"Love, I mean," she answered.

The very simplicity, the honesty of her inflamed him as if it were the flaunting of infidelity. He could have struck her across her white face and visioning eyes. He would have struck her if she hadn't turned away.

"Please, please understand," she said. "I didn't know. Angus must have been there right from the beginning with me . . . as you say I was with you; and I never understood at all. I wouldn't look."

He went to the window, pulled the blind aside and looked out. Strips of shadow and light going past his eyes like a striped paper before the eyes of a running drunkard.

"I wouldn't look," she repeated.

He laughed, and the whirling world stood still as if pinned for a minute by his laugh, and in that minute he turned and caught her in his arms and kissed her, a

kiss that set the world whirling again, only this time it was gold and red, red and gold, and it seemed to catch up his brain and twist it, heating it as if its red and goldenness were the glow of a fire.

She neither protested nor cried out. Of all that he expected of her, that his experience of women had led him to expect, nothing was there. There was neither anger, nor that outraged dignity that cradles still a spark of provocation, nor yet one gleam of that subconscious gratification that he had often evoked.

It was as if he had sought to spend his passion on a warm hand so violently that he had not noticed the substitution of a glove, and yet he knew she understood the feverishness he had not transmitted because the hand he had not touched had indeed once been really kissed.

"It didn't reach," she said: "Tom, try and understand as I am trying to tell you . . . nothing could reach except Angus. He got in and closed the gates after him, and I found him there. Even . . . if when I get back to London he doesn't want me he will always be there and I shall always want him. Please understand. There hasn't been another man in my life. That doesn't matter. What does matter is that there couldn't be another ever. I didn't think one could ever know that, but one does. Please understand. He was my enemy and is now my lover, although he has never been either really. Please understand. It's all so useless, everything else."

He kissed her again. He was ugly with passion. His face was hot, but his brain was hot too. It was that she felt and that affronted her.

"You feel *that*," he said thickly. "You feel that!"

"I don't," she said passionately. "That's what makes it such an insult."

He cursed. He cursed. He seemed to delight in dragging all that he had kept submerged in his acquaintance with her to the surface. She was wide-eyed before the exhibition, but very calm.

"Isn't all this a pity," she said. "Let's stop, Tom."

She was quite unassailable. It was as if he were a madman contesting sovereignty. Her very manner refuted him.

"I tell you what I am going to do," she said. "I am going to sell the house of dreams, the furniture and everything, and I am going to work. Kane will marry Bobbie. Judy will be a nurse. Pat will have a career. They'll follow their own roads. Angus gave them their freedom. I've only just seen it was their right; there should never have been the necessity to have had it secured for them."

"You talk like a damn schoolgirl!" he flung at her.

"Please go!" she said, "Please go!" She half rose.

"I'll stay here till I make you understand you're going to marry me."

"But I love Angus Reid."

He flung that on one side. "I know that. *I* want you. I don't want the things you'd give Angus Reid. I've had them time and again. I want the things that you and no other woman could give *me*! You're to furnish my life where it's ugly and empty and incomplete, where I can't even reach it."

"But I can't! I can't!"

"You shall!" he said.

He was in a bath of perspiration. His face was sweaty, greasy with it. It seemed in some dim way to wake her mind to pictures of his beginnings, his struggles up from degradation and ugliness, and for the very first time she saw that beginning as the roots of him. Hitherto she had seen it as something he had cast off. She shivered a little. He saw that shiver. It was like a hand putting them apart.

The door opened and Kane stood there.

She said: "It's late, Fannie. I'm just going to bed. Mrs. Fellowes thought . . ."

She looked at Ripon with frank, honest dislike.

"I'm going to marry your sister," he said.

"No!" Fannie cried sharply. "It isn't true!"

"She wouldn't," said Kane, slowly and deliberately and never taking her eyes off him. "She couldn't—marry—anyone—like—you."

He laughed and swung past them out of the room.

"Fannie," Kane said, "he's just plain beast. Why did he come? What does he mean? Mrs. Fellowes doesn't like him. She sent me in. He's been here such a long time. Fannie, what is it?"

"Did you know," said Fannie, "that Angus paid for this . . . your trousseau, my trip, Judy's schooling, Pat's schooling, everything?"

"He bought your freedom," Fannie said slowly. "And he bought my freedom . . . but I didn't know. Oh! Kane! Kane! I've been such a fool! Such a fool!"

"I knew you loved him, but you wouldn't let me say so," said Kane quite quietly. "I've known it for a long time."

"The peace that comes from letting people go their own way," said Fannie. "Kane, it's unbelievable."

"But why did Ripon come?"

"He came to tell us what we all owe to Angus. He thought . . . he hoped I would have found the debt intolerable. Until he showed me that he thought I would, I thought so too. He came to tell me Miss Proctor and Papa Pip and little Mr. Cole were starving. He drew a harrowing picture, Kane. He came to say he'd give me a home to offer them if I would make a home for him. Conditions, Kane, conditions all the time. I told him it wasn't possible. Besides, I *know* they don't want to come back and live my life. That's what I made you all do, dear, live my life, but I couldn't see it. Now I'm going to make atonement. I'm going to leave you all alone. It's the hardest thing a woman can do, Kane, to leave alone the people she loves best. I shall cross to England to-morrow."

"Why? Oh! Fannie! Tom may be crossing by the same boat."

"I can't help it, dear."

"You're not afraid of Ripon?"

"I'm not afraid of him exactly. I want to go back, dear. I want to rid myself of the house of broken dreams and start again, quite free. You're all free . . . but I'm not free yet."

"Fannie . . . will you?"

"If he asks me."

"He'll ask you."

"Gladly then."

"Fannie . . . it's wonderful! You'll understand."

"I'm going to join Papa Pip, Miss Proctor and the others."

"Fannie!"

"I think in a way I want to humble myself. We're all alike. I'd like him to find me there."

"Oh! Fannie! Fannie!"

"I'm stirred up to-night. To-morrow I shall worry again in case the old people haven't quite enough to eat. I shall always worry a little because people won't go my way, but I've given up expecting them to."

"Tom Ripon broke their dreams for them."

"I know. I wanted to tell him that. Angus was right there too, but I'm not sure they're not happier. There's a freedom in that too."

There was a knock at the door.

The little page stood outside with a letter on a silver salver.

"From Ripon!" said Kane sharply.

Fannie tore it open. Then she said in a queer, dull voice that seemed torn agonizingly from a swollen throat:

"Don't say anything to me to-night, Kane. Please, please, darling, not! You mustn't remember what I said. I've got . . . I'm going to marry Tom."

II

Fannie came back to London alone.

She explained nothing.

She seemed, as Kane wrote in a panic to Bobbie Buttons, "glazed." She was quiet, inscrutable; her laughter, her new-found eagerness and joy of life

dropped from her; she was again the serious, aloof girl who had directed and sought to control their destinies in the house of dreams; and, curiously enough, that barrier there had been between herself and all her associates reared itself again between her and Kane, and Kane could not displace it. The new, almost emotional tenderness there was between the sisters persisted but availed nothing.

"But you don't love Tom Ripon," Kane hurled at her again and again.

"I don't love Tom Ripon," Fannie agreed.

Her eyes mirrored something Kane could not read, not fear or apprehension, but some distaste evoked by a memory associated with him. Kane saw it over and over again, saw it in the involuntary curl of her generous mouth.

"You don't love him," she persisted.

And Fannie looked at her with those quiet grey eyes that were as tranquil as a nun's.

"I don't," she said quite simply, "but it doesn't help. I'm sorry for him. He's not a happy man."

"That's not why you're marrying him."

"No," Fannie agreed, "that's not the reason. Kane dear, leave it alone. I can't ever tell you. You can't ever know. Every time you point to it it gets bigger and bigger."

She clasped her hands. She was pale. She had been sleepless. The two sisters looked at each other.

"Tell me," coaxed Kane.

"I want to! I want to!" quivered Fannie. "And I can't! I can't ever!"

"He must have a hold over you," said Kane. "Oh!

Fannie, you don't know what you're doing! You don't know what you're doing!"

"I know what I'm doing," contradicted Fannie.

"You love Angus Reid," Kane flung at her.

"I know," said Fannie; the saddest smile glimmered in her eyes. "We'll have to keep up the disguise now."

"What disguise?"

"The disguise of being good enemies." She shut her eyes as if she would shut something away from Kane's intent, explorative stare. Kane got the odd impression of her thoughts, her imagination running about in a panic of realization behind the white mask of her face.

"Oh, my dear!" she pleaded. "Leave me alone! Leave me alone! You can't ever begin to understand because I can't ever begin to explain. I shall need you in my new life and in your new life. Don't make it impossible for them to join anywhere. Listen! Is there anything you want for your new home from the house of broken dreams?"

"Nothing!" said Kane violently. "Nothing."

"Miss Proctor and Papa Pip and little Mr. Cole must have the thing they love best, and I shall let all the rest go," said Fannie.

"You wouldn't live there with Ripon?"

"I couldn't!" Fannie protested sharply. "I couldn't."

"Can't I come with you?"

"No! No! Stay here with Bobbie's mother, and buy pretty things and look forward, darling, not back. Let me see this through. It doesn't belong to you or Judy or Pat except as a jumping-off ground, and

you've all jumped off safely and happily. I'm so glad of that, so grateful to Angus."

"Does Tom Ripon know when you're returning? Will he meet you?"

"No."

"But Fannie . . ."

Fannie put a hand gently over her mouth.

"Leave it, my dear," she urged gently. "Leave it."

So Kane went away and wrote Bobbie a hectic letter of dismay and stormy hatred of Ripon.

"He's got a hold over her," she wrote. "Get her free, Bobbie. Get hold of Angus Reid. I believe if he made love to her. Bobbie, she's never had anyone make love to her . . . if he took her by storm. It's the queerest situation. She never denies her love for Angus. I believe she's been honest about it to Ripon, but I'm sure he'll get her unless you do something! She goes in an hour or two. She goes straight home. Perhaps Ripon will meet her. Go round and see her. Only do something somehow. She's quite, quite honest. She never tries to evade it, she loves Angus Reid and she's going to marry Tom Ripon; she's as positive about one as about the other. I can't make her out. She's become the big sister again and I can't get near her, although she's close to me in the way a mother might be. She can only see one road and she's looking straight down it, and she's going to walk to the end of it. I feel that. At the end of it is that boulder Ripon. We none of us like him. We've none of us ever liked him. I thought it was all over. Now it's all cropped up again. Only it's worse this time. She

seemed so offhand, I mean in that way, when she came out here. His letters used to make her angry with the old people. Reading between the lines you would see how they were treating him because they hadn't succeeded. That used to make her angry, not in a personal way, but in an ordinary way, as if it were injustice to a stranger. Oh, Bobbie dear, *do* something, for pity's sake."

Robert de Bouton went round to the house of dreams at once.

The little Punchinello butler let him in. His face wore an expression of ominous gravity.

"Miss Fannie is in her study, sir," he said.

"Alone?"

"At the moment. Miss Proctor, Papa Pip and Mr. Cole are back in their old quarters, helping her clear out her father's papers and so on. It's a terrible business. The sale is the day after to-morrow."

"Look here, all this I hear isn't true?"

"There's no knowing what you've heard, sir."

"Miss Fannie's not going to marry Tom Ripon."

"He says so, sir. He was here last night and again this morning."

"Good God! The thing is unthinkable!"

"I think it's true enough, sir."

"Look here! *What* do you know?"

"What I'm told, sir," answered the little Punchinello butler promptly.

Bobbie looked him straight in the eye.

"I suppose you've your own reasons for not telling me," he said quietly. "Very well, I'm going to find out."

"Yes sir," said the little butler expressionlessly.

He peeped into the drawing-room on the way to the study. A mist of overgrown green veiled the window at the far end; underneath the other window that overlooked the square knelt Miss Proctor tying books into bundles.

"Well?" he said sternly, "this is a pretty business."

"I think it's the best thing that could possibly happen," said Miss Proctor blithely. "We're all of us starting all over again."

"I'm referring to Fannie and Ripon."

The brightness faded out of the old lady's eyes.

"Oh, that!" she said. "That I don't understand at all. Fannie's not happy. That I *can* tell you. I think she despises Ripon from the bottom of her heart."

"Looks like it!"

"If you saw them together you'd know."

"Have you any idea why she's agreed to marry him?"

"Not the least in the world."

"Our friend the Punchinello downstairs knows."

"I give you my word I don't, Bobbie. My solemn word!"

"I believe you," said Bobbie.

He walked rather slowly and heavily along the corridor to Fannie's little green-and-white study.

"Of course," she said, greeting him, "you've come to hear all about Kane."

"It can actually wait," he told her quietly, "until I've heard all about you."

She flashed a quick look at him. She looked abom-

inably ill and yet beautiful; her grey eyes were tragic with those black circles of sleeplessness and worry beneath them.

"I have nothing to tell you."

"Kane says you are going to marry Tom Ripon. Why?"

She made a fluttering, protesting gesture with her white hands.

"Oh, Bobbie! not you too!"

"Particularly me! I'm Angus Reid's friend."

She said:

"Look here! I don't pretend to misunderstand, Bobbie, but you mustn't go on. Please don't go on. He had so much of it from all of them."

"You must be mad," he said, "knowing *what* you know about Angus and yourself, *knowing* what you feel and what he feels. Ah! you *know* right enough. I can see it in your face. I knew before Angus knew. I knew right from the very first that Angus was going to love you. You talk of marrying Tom Ripon. Good God! girl! be decent."

She was quite white, like a mask lifted to him. Through the window he saw Papa Pip in the little garden, lifting things, little plants as if they were little children who had fallen.

"You're going to be my brother," she said. "I beg of you . . . It's all so useless, and they keep on and on. I'm so tired, so tired! Can't you see how dreadfully tired I am, Bobbie?"

"Yes," said Bobbie, "I can."

"Tom and I are going abroad," she faltered. "Away to the East. We shall be away a year. When I come

back we shall have got used to things. Judy has written to know if she can go to Switzerland these summer holidays with a school friend and her mother. It all works out so well. Kane will be married to you. When we come back it will all be settled. Other people will be living here. It will all seem such a long way back that it will be easy to go on going on."

"So *that's* the way you talk, and *that* doesn't show you! Fannie, my dear, have you gone mad?"

"No! no! I am saner than any of you. That is what is so funny, but you worry me until I am nearly mad. I am so tired, Bobbie; can't you see how tired I am? Let me talk to you about Kane, Bobbie. She goes to see your mother every day, and next week when Professor and Mrs. Fellowes come back to England she will go and stay there altogether. Mrs. Fellowes hates to part with her. She's been like a daughter. She looks so pretty, Bobbie, prettier than ever, and so happy."

"She's *not* happy."

"But she's going to be, Bobbie. All this . . . this agitation will settle in a very little while and things will be normal. It *is* for the best. Whatever and however things look now, it *is* for the best."

"I wish I could find Angus."

"Where is he?" Fannie asked eagerly, and bit her lip.

He looked at her with a faint, malicious triumph.

"You *see* what it does to you, Fannie! Just the mere mention of his name. Oh! you're a queer girl, you always have been, but you won't escape the universal penalties of love. You're paying double for trying

to evade them. That damned old mother of Angus knows where he is, but the moment I mentioned I wanted him for you she shut up like a rat trap. He's gone somewhere on business connected with one of the estates. I've telegraphed everywhere I could. I've left a note at his diggings asking him to come on here the moment he returns."

"Oh, no!" she said sharply.

He sat on the edge of the desk and peered at her with his brilliant blue eyes. His brown, blunt-featured face was solemn. He gripped her shoulder.

"Look here," he said. "I'm going to talk straight out. You've got to listen. You've got to understand. God knows what crazy rivalry or pity is making you offer this man marriage. It isn't marriage. It's something no woman has any right to offer any man. It's hideous and ugly and valueless and even *unclean*. It's no good looking at me like that. You're out of your fairy-tale. I don't know that you ever had any right in it."

She wrenched herself from under his hand.

"Be quiet," she said. "You don't know in the least what you are talking about. I'm not tricking Tom. He knows I love Angus, because I told him."

"Let me tell you something," Bobbie said. "Let me tell you something about Angus Reid. He's a one-woman man and he was your man right from the very first. He's tried to love women enough to marry them. I've seen him. I watched him with Marjorie Moneypenny. They never touched him. He had every cause to marry. Not many men want to marry. Fewer than you women dream. Angus wanted to marry, be-

cause he's essentially a family man. He delights in a sense of responsibility. He has a passionately proprietorial instinct. His mother wanted him to marry and settle down. He has a lot of little estates to administer. His life as country squire suited him, as their lives suit few men. It only lacked one thing—his woman and his children. He sought his woman consciously and subconsciously. He never found her till he found you. I've loved many women a little. Angus hasn't. His love was something he wanted to give and couldn't. He envied me. I think he would rather have liked the thrill no one ever gave him until you came into his life. I don't know if I were a woman that I'd want to be a man's first love. Not one woman in a thousand is. But you are. If he had kept a thousand harems you still would be!"

She was quiet under his detaining hand, his detaining eyes. He could read nothing in her face but overpowering weariness.

"But you've been looking for your man," he said. "And when you found him in Angus Reid it was like giving up your freedom, and you weren't big enough to do it. You let men come into your consciousness deliberately just in order to dismiss them. That gave you a sense of sex freedom that you knew the other women round you hadn't got. You were proud that you could dismiss them. There are lots of women like you, Fannie. They wear their crown of virginity combined with a passionate desire for voluntary abdication. When Angus came you weren't big enough to let go. You fought it, and your love burnt fiercer because you chose to call it hate. I had done with

women the day after I met Kane in this house, but I knew before I had done with them. I know your type. You think you are a temperament, but you are a type. All women are types. The reason you had no men before Angus is the same reason Angus had no women before he met you. You had not met the right one. When you did, it came as a shock to your self-sufficiency, your sex egotism . . . it was that that revolted, not the natural, aloof virginity you prided yourself upon. You never had it. You were looking for Angus. You belonged to him before you met him, and you knew it when you met him. It is a virtue in neither of you. There will be no other man for you. Angus had you when he raised in you that blind anger that is the recognition of capture and is the most satisfying emotion that natures like yours can know. You called this the house of dreams, Fannie, and you've seen them broken one by one, and you know they were hampering delusions."

She looked at him with wide, clear eyes.

"All that you say is true. I have known it for a long time. I must put it behind me. I have learnt to look things in the face. Don't imagine me skulking behind facts. I have turned things over and over again and again."

He stared at her. He saw her stirred; her emotionalism, her utter weariness touched her with a beauty his brown Kane would never have. She was beautiful, with her great thought-ridden eyes, her coronet of stivery, copper-coloured hair and her generous, passionate, quivering red mouth. She had capitulated. All the old conventions, the old delusions with which

she decked herself in her own eyes were discarded. She was at the moment more simple than she had ever believed herself, more single-minded.

He said huskily, gripping her hands:

"Don't fight, old lady, don't fight . . . it's like fighting against God, the puniness of you and the greatness of It. You hoped for love."

"I hoped for love."

"You waited for it."

"I waited for it," she said unsteadily.

The quick twilight of early Spring had come while they talked. He seemed near to her in that warm glow of understanding, nearer almost than he had ever been to Kane.

He felt her tears hot on his hand.

"And love came," he said softly.

"But it can't make any difference, Bobbie dear," she said. "You don't understand. It can't make any difference."

* * * * *

He heard the little cry she gave; but he had seen the thing of which it was just the voice flying in her eyes and quivering in her face.

"Oh, Angus!" she said. "Oh, Angus!"

Angus said urgently, swiftly:

"I found the letter and I came at once."

She put her two hands, spread, palm inwards against his breast. She was not crying, but her voice was heavy like an old woman's with the force of her pent-up tears.

"You know I am marrying Tom Ripon to-morrow?"

"I made him let me come to you."

"Oh, Angus! Angus!"

"He knows what I am going to say to you. It must be told. I can't go through life and not have told you, not have had you listen. Fannie, he gave me half an hour. Half an hour of all the time that will be his. But that's *ours, ours!* Nothing can ever take it from us."

"I have got to marry him."

"I know. I know. I understand. I love you, sweetheart; that is the first and last thing that matters to me."

Bobbie de Bouton closed the door very gently after him.

He went downstairs.

"Is Mr. Ripon in?" he said to the little Punchinello butler.

"He said he would return in half an hour. His taxi followed Mr. Reid's." He looked at Bobbie queerly. "They talked together on the pavement, and then Mr. Reid came in alone, sir."

"Yes," said Bobbie. "I know." He paused. "Show Mr. Ripon into the drawing-room."

"He usually goes straight to the study, sir."

"Very well," said Bobbie, still more slowly. "I'll sit in the hall till he returns."

III

It grew dark and quiet; through the glass panel above the front door Bobbie saw the faint silver point-

ing of stars. His thoughts settled slumbrously and then wheeled away, startled by some faint noise. There were only faint echoes, little brittle scurryings of distant mice, the crack of old wood like the impress of a ghostly footstep, old, old noises like echoes of some vivid, eager past life that was slowly settling into decay.

There was magic in that house; there was enchantment.

It laid its spell upon the queer artist soul of Robert de Bouton as he sat there, quickening in him the appreciation of its origin. Life flowed in and out of old places like a sea; and like a shell this place held the mystery, the fascination, the echo of the life that had worked itself restlessly through it without revealing anything.

The wave the O'Ranes had made was retreating, and soon another set of lives would make another wave; that was its magic, the barely perceptible impress of many comings and goings that gave it an atmosphere of immortality.

He was at the door before Tom Ripon had time to ring. Out of the shadow of the unlighted hall the white disc faces of the two men loomed at each other above their dark bodies.

"Come in," said Bobbie Buttons. His hand flew from his side in an unconsciously compelling gesture, and in a queer, disembodied way it fluttered down and seemed to lie detached against the darkness of his trouser leg.

"What the devil do you want?" said Tom Ripon. Then he broke out suddenly: "It's too late in the day, my friend! It's too late in the day!" He seemed

to throw his voice behind Bobbie, as if he asked a question of the unanswering shadows. "I gave them half an hour to say good-bye," he said. "They've had more than that. I've been generous."

Bobbie took him by the arm.

"You are coming quietly into the drawing-room," he said, "and you are going to wait there, quietly, until midnight if need be, until Angus has exhausted every argument that love and common sense can dictate to prevent that idiot girl committing this crazy marriage."

"I've got the cards," said Tom Ripon. "I don't like force. I've had too much of it. I've got the cards. I can afford to wait till long after midnight if necessary. I know you're against me, de Bouton; the whole place is against me, but I'll carry it. I hold a card you don't know anything about. You'll never know anything about it. You'll always wonder."

"You shan't butt in an hour before they let you in."

"I can afford to wait," said Tom Ripon. "But give me a whisky-and-soda. I'm nearly all in."

"You can have that," said de Bouton.

"And don't turn on the lights. I can't stand them. It doesn't matter to you whether we wait in darkness. We shan't have long to wait. Don't claw my arm, you fool. I'm not going to make a bolt for the study door. I can afford to wait."

"Good Lord! are you a man at all?"

"Not by your standards," said Tom Ripon wearily. "Let's have that whisky-and-soda. It's perfectly all right. I'm not going to move. If I made for the door

I know exactly what you'd do." He paused. "Well, I don't want you to do it."

Miss Proctor looked up from her books in a startled way as they came in.

"I didn't expect . . ." she said. "Shall I go away?"

"It doesn't make any difference," Tom Ripon said unexpectedly. "Nothing makes any difference to the end. This is forced sentimental delay. An over-zealous friend." He made a gesture towards de Bouton. "My God! I'm tired, tired!" He sat down and looked at them. "I'm overstrung," he said. "I've had them before . . . fancies. I ought to know them. It isn't your scorn, your laughter, I care about. It's this place. It always has, it always will, laugh. Shall I tell you something? I'm afraid of it. It's a funny house, that's what it is. I know what you think of me, both of you. I've always known." He looked at Emily Proctor. "I could have told you just when you altered your old point of view because it suited you, and just when you permitted it to return. I'll tell you what I think of you. You're fools, but you're lucky, healthy fools. You can't ever see the edge of life like I do sometimes. You don't understand. I don't know that I can explain. It is as if the world suddenly turned square and you found yourself on the edge of it with nothing below you but space, and only you knew it was square. Fannie is going to stand between me and the edge. She is going to keep the world round for me in all the pretty, conventional, futile, well-bred ways that keep you from suddenly seeing the futility and the utter meaninglessness of it all. Her idealism, her petty sentimentalism,

all her futile, pretty femininisms, her conventional, passionate belief in the end and the importance of mankind and the necessity of conforming to standard shall be my salvation, my buttress against myself."

"You only think of yourself."

"I need her. God knows no man ever needed a woman more. Isn't that what we're all seeking in our ghastly hidden loneliness . . . the need of being vital to someone."

"She loves Angus Reid," Miss Proctor twittered earnestly.

"And I love her," said Tom Ripon. "Who is to say which is the greater, love or need, or which should win."

"Reid loves her," Bobbie burst out impulsively.

"He has what I have tried to acquire and failed to get—a rule of conduct, fixed stars to guide by. He has them stronger than any man I know. Because he fancies that he sees a road he makes it. I see no road, I believe in no stars. My forebears cut no road for me. When I look back I see only the pit from which I came. My way is set about with the roads that other men and their fathers have hewed. I cannot take them. They are not mine. They are foreign to me. I have had my moments of absurd, godlike exaltation when I have conquered things; but they have broken like moments that never had real life, and I have found myself at the meaningless, terrible edge of things again. Fannie would make Angus Reid a superb wife; that is why *I* need her. I cannot, cannot believe in the importance of life or of myself. Fannie believes passionately. She shall teach me to believe. You think

I'm mad. You think I'm quite mad. Men who think hide away this secret belief of being nothing in a void, and when it masters them they are hidden away that they may not infect others and that the panoply and pageant of life may go on and men keep sane and safe in the belief of their own real existence and importance. I don't care what you both think of me because I am so near safety. Fannie's delusions shall become my beliefs as they are hers; she shall fold me in her own inestimable self-importance, and I shall be at rest and I shall be grateful, and I shall show my gratitude as few men do, because I have imagination and I shall never forget the icy nothingness from which she has rescued me. What is love but gratitude for what you get or what you give? I shall both give and receive in ways past your understanding."

The room was quite dark now. A crescent moon peered through the window that overlooked the garden; the light from the lamp in the square was on the window like a gold ribbon thrown across ebony.

The door opened and Papa Pip came in.

"Emily," he said, "I think we ought to go home."

He switched the light on and stared at them surprised.

"Turn the light off and keep vigil, Papa Pip," Tom Ripon said harshly. "The more the merrier. They will not let me go up to Fannie till Angus Reid has left her. It is so absurd, because the result will be the same and the memory will last longer, and it will be the memory that will hurt them. Nothing else but the memory."

His eyes were brilliant, his face grey. He leant for-

ward and smiled, and they felt he smiled at things they did not see, things of which they had become merely the outward symbols.

"You can't do anything," he said defiantly. "None of you can do anything. We are waiting for the result of what has gone before."

IV

In the study there was no light either.

Fannie sat in her little chair and Angus knelt beside her, his arms round her, his cheek against her, so that when either of them spoke it was as if their joint thoughts left them like things mutually released, and they were conscious of a sense of happy lightness and ineffable satisfaction and pleasure.

The moment Bobbie left them alone Fannie sprang at explanations, almost as if they were not the vital thing but some slight barrier to be cleared swiftly away and leave their time free.

"If I do not marry Tom Ripon he will tell Philip Kerr about Gladys. They are waiting for the baby. Angus, they're so wonderful. I was there yesterday. I think I meant to tell her what Tom threatened, and plead. I couldn't. Tom told me what he was going to say. He has learnt it like a speech. Clever, so clever! Tom isn't like other people. He would do it. Philip is a holy man surrounded by weak people. He's the sort of man weak people go to and are kept safe. He is to go to another and larger living. He will be a big influence, yet I know, I *know* he's not a big enough man to know. If he were he might be a bigger man,

but he wouldn't be useful to others any more. Angus, don't look like that. I can't bear it, dear. Don't look like that. Don't interrupt. Let me go on. I've thought and thought. I knew if you came I wouldn't deny your love. I didn't even hope you wouldn't come in time. I prayed you would. Listen how I see this thing. We've such a little time. Let us get it straight."

"It isn't straight!"

"It is, my dear, it is. That's the awful part of it, so straight that we can only walk down it as if it were the only road in all the world. It isn't even sacrifice; it's just adjusting ourselves."

"I can't see it like that! My God! Fannie! I can't. I guessed—coming here I suddenly saw what his cards were."

"I think it would really be a release for Gladys if Philip knew, but her hope of usefulness would be gone too. She's secretly crucified all the time by the fact that he doesn't know, that nobody knows, and it gives her something . . . some atmosphere that is a source of inspiration to Philip and to everyone she comes in contact with. She is! Oh, Angus! she is. She isn't the same Gladys. She's utterly, utterly indifferent. I felt it. The house, everything in it was good, sanctified. Believe me! believe me, Angus, it's the truth I'm telling you! They've made him a prison chaplain, and he takes into the prison . . . that sanctification, that *sureness* of goodness . . . that wideness of vision that has come to them both out of this. We can't rob them of it, because we are robbing so many others."

Her hands touched his face, framed it warmly.

"I love you so," she said. "You don't know how I love you."

He was quite quiet under her hands and eyes.

"Is this all we are going to get out of life?" he said, "this hour?"

She stirred neither her steady hands nor eyes.

"It is, my dear. You know it is. I don't know whether we lose or gain by being ourselves, people to whom furtive reunions would be soiling. I couldn't do it. I'm not going to do it. I must get something out of this love that has come too late. It's far too beautiful and wonderful to leave our lives empty. Let us at least have the consciousness that it is not as other loves quite, that it has left us sanctified in some queer way."

"Tom Ripon wasn't bluffing?"

"He wasn't bluffing," she said. "I'd swear to that."

"There isn't any way out?"

"There isn't any way out at all, Angus, except over broken lives and trusts and faiths. I have a consolation that you haven't. The knowledge that Tom really needs me."

He said with a sudden flash of insight: "We don't seem to have anything to tell each other. It is as if all things are told and understood."

She said, like a child-woman, with her voice sharp with pain:

"You'll marry, Angus?"

"I can't see beyond this," he told her. "For me all things that matter seem to end here and now. I'm going to talk to Tom Ripon when he comes. There

must be some humanity in him somewhere, some spark of decency."

"I told him I loved you. Over and over again I've told him. I've pleaded. I've told him what I think of him. It's no good. He wants me. In his way he wants me as much as you want me. He isn't quite like other men. It isn't any good, my dear. It isn't any good." Her voice sounded as if she were crying. "We shall have this hour always, my dear, if we build it now. If love was to go on it would be crowded out by other hours, other emotions, but it is going to stand quite alone."

He held her close. He could not tell what he felt or knew. He seemed to know all things and hold the sum of them in his arms. He sensed the minutes racing by, and yet it gave him a proud, high feeling of immortality to let them go in silence and immobility. He held her cheek against his; her hair moved restlessly on his forehead; it seemed warm and alive. His thoughts whirled by him like leaves. He knew that once they had grown, they had possessed form and meaning.

"You and I, Fannie," he said. "You and I," and rocked her a little unconsciously in his arms.

"It all finishes here," she whispered. "The house of broken dreams."

The house, the world, the hour seemed to close softly round them like doors enclosing their loneliness.

"Let us give each other things to remember." She twisted her hands in his.

"You know all I would say."

"But I want to hear it."

He found words then. He flung them burning, gauging each one with a desperate cunning, against her quiet resolution. He lost consciousness of his own personality and hers. Yet as he pursued her with tireless pleas and arguments he suddenly grew tired, tired and sick, as if he had importuned her for an eternity. The brilliant flare of words died down and left him in an arid mental darkness where he only recognized his coming loss of her. And as if she had actually fled from him and was weary with her flight, she cried out in a small, tired, broken voice:

"Oh! you are making me so tired and weak, Angus. It's cruel of you, cruel of you," and broke into passionate sobbing.

He did not know what he said. His resolution, his anger, that had been as much against her for her denial of him as against Ripon was suddenly broken up into inarticulate tenderness that hurt him more than his anger, that was like a pressure that crushed his hope and happiness and carried him round and round relentlessly in a circle made by his own unhappiness and hers.

She clung to him.

"It can't be long before he comes," she whispered. "Angus . . . promise you'll go away before he comes."

"I promise."

"When I hear him along the passage."

"When you hear him along the passage."

"Kiss me good-bye now."

He kissed her.

He would not have kissed, had he known it was to be a kiss of greeting, not of farewell. The room closed over them like a tent of darkness, and in it they met for the first time. In it he became aware not only of her beauty and wonder, but of his own, so that the resultant ecstasy was as if they pressed it upon each other, a mutual gift.

He said:

"Sweetheart, you can't! You can't! Nobody could after that!"

She seemed to creep close to him for comfort and shelter. He could see her eyes wide and frightened.

"I can't bear very much more," she said. "I wish, I wish, he'd come!"

v

Little Mr. Cole turned on the light.

He did not mean to see anyone. Yet he made a little gesture that included them all, Tom Ripon, Bobbie Buttons, everyone.

Then he turned off the light again.

"You can turn it on," said Miss Proctor sharply. "I'm tired of sitting here in the dark."

He turned it on and looked at her, looked at them all.

"Miss Bright has just been here from the vicarage," he said.

"Boy or girl?" broke in Miss Proctor cheerfully.

"I don't know," he said.

"Didn't you ask?"

"Gladys Kerr is dead," the little man said sadly. "She and the baby. They're both dead."

"Why!" exclaimed Miss Proctor. "Why!" She looked at him stupidly, unbelievably, with her mouth open, and then, suddenly, as if she had heard the news repeated, began to cry.

"Someone ought to tell Fannie," said Papa Pip sharply.

Involuntarily they looked at Tom Ripon, and he looked back at them strangely, almost as if he saw them from a long way off.

"You don't know," he said thickly, unsteadily, "how f-funny it all is." He paused. "You wouldn't think a little thing like that would alter all my plans."

"Look here!" Robert de Bouton burst out.

"Save it!" Ripon said. "Save it! I'm going away. I'm going out of England. You mayn't think it, but I loved Fannie O'Rane. That's what makes it all so darn funny. I'm going right away. I should like you to say that."

They had risen to their feet. They were staring at him.

"The house of broken dreams, you called it," he said, with a little bow. "That's damn funny too."

He walked to the door and looked back at them.

"Good-bye," he said. "I love to be dramatic. You none of you understand." They could not tell whether it was tears or laughter that leapt into his brilliant eyes. "I am always making effective exits and entries, and only I know that I pass from emptiness to emptiness." He turned to little Mr. Cole. "If I were you,"

he said, "I should let Angus Reid tell Fannie that Gladys Kerr is dead. She will marry Angus Reid. There is a little of the mountebank in both of us, Mr. Cole. I would be what we so dearly love . . . a supreme *beau geste*."

THE END

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